

What are you going to eat?

Learn how to get the right balance

Diet. For many of us, this word is always in the back of our minds. We worry about our health, how we look, whether we're getting enough of the right foods or too much of the wrong ones and how all of this will affect our bodies as we get older. And we have good reason to think that way: Your eating habits and activity level affect your health more than anything besides smoking.¹

With our busy lives, nutrition is often the first thing we let slip. Sometimes, getting a burger from the drive-thru just seems easier. But the food we get away from home usually has less fruit, vegetables, whole grains and dairy² – all of which are important for a healthy diet.

Food for thought

It takes some extra time, but planning and preparing healthy meals and snacks can add years to your life.¹ A little extra effort now could mean great benefits to your health in the future.

But with different diets becoming popular all the time, it's hard to know what we should really be eating. Is it healthiest to cut out all breads and rice, and just eat steaks and eggs? Is it better not to eat any meat?

A healthy diet isn't as simple as not eating entire food groups. All types of food add different nutrients that our bodies need. The key is to get the right balance of all of the food groups.

Keeping calories low when you're on the go

When eating out, it can be hard to get the nutrients you need. Here are some tips for healthy eating away from home.³

- Order water or unsweetened tea instead of drinks with added sugar.
- Start your meal with a salad (with dressing on the side). It'll help you control hunger and make you feel fuller sooner.
- Choose dishes that include vegetables, even if it's only pasta with tomato sauce.
- Order steamed, grilled or broiled foods instead of ones that are fried or sautéed.
- When you'll be in the car for a long time, pack fresh fruits or vegetables, low-fat string cheese or a handful of unsalted nuts to snack on.
- Skip the buffets. Order small or half-sized portions, when you can. Or, ask for half of your food to be packaged to go when you order.
- Order fruit for dessert.

Go to [nutrition.gov](https://www.nutrition.gov) for tools, tips, recipes and information on healthy eating and nutrition to help you get the most out of your food. Or, go to [healthfinder.gov](https://www.healthfinder.gov) to read all about nutrition in the “Health A to Z” section, including how small changes in your eating habits can make a big difference.

Follow these tips to get the right balance in your diet:¹

- **Carbs:** Don't go without them, but pick the right ones. They give your body the fuel it needs for physical activity and help your organs work properly. But some kinds of carbs are better for you than others. Whole grains, vegetables, fruit and beans are good choices. They'll give you vitamins, minerals, fiber and more nutrients your body needs. Bad carbs come from refined grains, which make them easier to digest. Skip things like white bread, white rice, pastries, soda and highly processed foods, like packaged snacks.
 - **Protein:** A lot of different foods have protein. But some of those foods are healthier for you than others. A steak has a lot of protein, but it usually has a lot of fat, too. Choose fish, poultry, lentils and nuts instead. If you do want to eat red meat, pick the leanest cuts, watch your portion size and only eat it once in awhile.
 - **Fats:** You actually need fat in your diet. Healthy fats, that is. Plant oils, nuts and fish are healthy sources of fat. Try to limit the amount of foods you eat that have saturated fats — like cheeses and meats — and avoid trans fats. Read the labels on the foods you buy to make sure they don't have any trans fat.
 - **Fiber:** A diet with a lot of whole grains, beans, vegetables and fruits will help you get the fiber your body needs. Fiber can help protect you against certain health problems.
 - **Vegetables and fruits:** These foods can also help protect you against certain health problems. Don't know what to pick? Go for color and variety: dark green, yellow, orange and red. Just remember, potatoes don't count as a vegetable.
- **Calcium:** Calcium is important for healthy bones. Milk and other dairy products are good sources for calcium, but they're not the only ones. Nondairy sources of calcium include collards, bok choy, fortified soy milk and baked beans.
 - **Water:** Skip the sugary drinks and have water instead. It has no calories and you can find it anywhere. Sugary drinks give you just that: sugar.
 - **Salt:** A diet that's high in salt can cause health problems. Choose more fresh foods and cut down on processed foods, which are usually high in salt levels. And read the labels of the foods you buy to check how much salt — listed as sodium — is in them.
 - **Alcohol:** Moderate drinking can be healthy, but not for everyone. Moderate drinking for women is up to one drink a day; for men, it's up to two drinks a day. There are benefits, such as improved heart health, but also risks, such as increased risks for certain health problems like breast and colon cancer.
 - **Multivitamin:** Taking a multivitamin, especially one with vitamin D, every day can help your health. There is such a thing as having too much of a good thing though. So don't overdo it with the vitamins.

Too much of a good thing

Even if you try to eat a balanced diet, portion sizes can work against you. Find out what a serving of a food looks like on a plate so you'll know if you're eating too much or too little. You can also try using smaller plates for your meals. And serve plates at the stove instead of at the table, so you think twice before having seconds.⁴



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Sources: (1) Harvard School of Public Health, Department of Nutrition, *The Nutrition Source* (Accessed November 2011): hsph.harvard.edu. (2) United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, *Diet Quality and Food Consumption: Food Away from Home* (2010): ers.usda.gov. (3) United States Department of Agriculture, *Tips for Eating Healthy when Eating Out* (2011): mypyramid.gov. (4) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Healthy Weight* (2011): cdc.gov.