

Diet and Nutrition Tips for Women

Eating Right to Look and Feel Your Best at Every Stage of Life



Trying to balance the demands of family and work or school—and coping with media pressure to look and eat a certain way—can make it difficult for any woman to maintain a healthy diet. But the right food can not only support your mood, boost your energy, and help you maintain a healthy weight, it can also be a huge support through the different stages in a woman’s life. Healthy food can help reduce PMS, boost fertility, make pregnancy and nursing easier, ease symptoms of menopause, and keep your bones strong. Whatever your age or situation, committing to a healthy, nutritious diet will help you look and feel your best and get the most out of life.

How do women’s nutritional needs differ from men’s?

As children, boys’ and girls’ dietary needs are largely similar. But when puberty begins, women start to develop unique nutritional requirements. And as we age and our bodies go through more physical and hormonal changes, so our nutritional needs continue to evolve, making it important that our diets evolve to meet these changing needs.

While women tend to need fewer calories than men, our requirements for certain vitamins and minerals are much higher. Hormonal changes associated with menstruation, child-bearing, and menopause mean that women have a higher risk of anemia, weakened bones, and osteoporosis, requiring a higher intake of nutrients such as iron, calcium, magnesium, vitamin D, and vitamin B9 (folate).

Why many women fall short of the nutritional guidelines

As women, many of us are prone to neglecting our own dietary needs. You may feel you’re too busy to eat right, used to putting the needs of your family first, or trying to adhere to an extreme diet that leaves you short on vital nutrients and feeling cranky, hungry, and low on

energy. Women's specific needs are often neglected by dietary research, too. Studies tend to rely on male subjects whose hormone levels are more stable and predictable, thus sometimes making the results irrelevant or even misleading to women's needs. All this can add up to serious shortfalls in your daily nutrition.

While what works best for one woman may not always be the best choice for another, the important thing is to build your dietary choices around your vital nutritional needs. Whether you're looking to improve your energy and mood, combat stress or PMS, boost fertility, enjoy a healthy pregnancy, or ease the symptoms of menopause, these nutrition tips can help you to stay healthy and vibrant throughout your ever-changing life.

Why supplements alone aren't enough

In the past, women have often tried to make up deficits in their diet through the use of vitamins and supplements. However, while supplements can be a useful safeguard against occasional nutrient shortfalls, they can't compensate for an unbalanced or unhealthy diet. To ensure you get all the nutrients you need from the food you eat, try to aim for a diet rich in fruit, vegetables, quality protein, healthy fats, and low in processed, fried, and sugary foods.

Calcium for strong bones throughout life

Among other things, you need calcium to build healthy bones and teeth, keep them strong as you age, regulate the heart's rhythm, and ensure your nervous system functions properly. Calcium deficiency can lead to, or exacerbate, mood problems such as irritability, anxiety, depression, and sleep difficulties. If you don't get enough calcium in your diet, your body will take calcium from your bones to ensure normal cell function, which can lead to weakened bones or osteoporosis. Women are at a greater risk than men of developing osteoporosis, so it's important to get plenty of calcium, in combination with magnesium and vitamin D, to [support your bone health](#).

How much calcium, magnesium, and vitamin D do you need?

Calcium: *For adult women aged 19-50, the USDA recommended daily allowance is 1,000 mg/day. For women over 50, the recommended daily allowance is 1,200 mg/day. Good sources of calcium include dairy products, leafy green vegetables, certain fish, grains, tofu, cabbage, and summer squash. Your body cannot take in more than 500 mg at any one time and there's no benefit to exceeding the recommended daily amount.*

Magnesium: Magnesium increases calcium absorption from the blood into the bone. In fact, your body can't utilize calcium without it. *The USDA recommended daily allowance for*

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magnesium is 320 to 400 mg/day. Good sources include leafy green vegetables, summer squash, broccoli, halibut, cucumber, green beans, celery, and a variety of seeds.

Vitamin D: Vitamin D is also crucial to the proper metabolism of calcium. Aim for 600 IU (international units) daily. You can get Vitamin D from about half an hour of direct sunlight, and from foods such as salmon, shrimp, vitamin-D fortified milk, cod, and eggs.

Good food sources of calcium

Food	Milligrams (mg) per serving
Yogurt, plain, low fat, 8 ounces	415
Mozzarella, part skim, 1.5 ounces	333
Cheddar cheese, 1.5 ounces	307
Cottage cheese, (1% milk fat), 8 ounces	138
Cheese, cream, regular, 1 tablespoon	14
Milk, nonfat, 8 ounces	299
Milk, reduced-fat (2% milk fat), 8 ounces	293
Milk, whole (3.25% milk fat), 8 ounces	276
Soymilk, calcium-fortified, 8 ounces	299
Ready-to-eat cereal, calcium-fortified, 1 cup	100-1,000
Sardines, canned in oil, with bones, 3 ounces	325
Salmon, pink, canned, solids with bone, 3 ounces	181
Tofu, firm, made with calcium sulfate, 1/2 cup	253
Tofu, soft, made with calcium sulfate, 1/2 cup	138
Turnip greens, fresh, boiled, 1/2 cup	99
Kale, raw, chopped, 1 cup	100
Kale, fresh, cooked, 1 cup	94
Chinese cabbage, bok choy, raw, shredded, 1 cup	74
Broccoli, raw, 1/2 cup	21

Source: *National Institutes of Health*

Should you avoid dairy because of its saturated fat content?

As the table above shows, some of the best sources of calcium are dairy products. However, dairy products such as whole milk, cheese, and yogurt also tend to contain high levels of saturated fat. The USDA recommends limiting your saturated fat intake to no more than 10% of your daily calories, meaning you can enjoy whole milk dairy in moderation and opt for no- or low-fat dairy products when possible. Just be aware that reduced fat dairy products often contain lots of added sugar, which can have negative effects on both your health and waistline.

The importance of exercise for bone health

In addition to diet, [exercise](#) and other lifestyle factors can also play an important role in bone health. Smoking and drinking too much alcohol can increase your chances of developing osteoporosis, while weight-bearing exercise (such as walking, dancing, yoga, or lifting weights) can lower your risk. Strength or resistance training—using machines, free weights, elastic bands, or your own body weight—can be especially effective in helping to prevent loss of bone mass as you age.

Iron: why you may not be getting enough

Iron helps to create the hemoglobin that carries oxygen in your blood. It's also important to maintaining healthy skin, hair, and nails. Due to the amount of blood lost during menstruation, women of childbearing age need more than twice the amount of iron that men do—even more during pregnancy and breastfeeding. However, many of us aren't getting nearly enough iron in our diets, making iron deficiency anemia the most common deficiency in women.

Anemia can deplete your energy, leaving you feeling weak, exhausted, and out of breath after even minimal physical activity. Iron deficiency can also impact your mood, causing depression-like symptoms such as irritability and difficulty concentrating. While a simple blood test can tell your doctor if you have an iron deficiency, if you're feeling tired and cranky all the time, it's a good idea to examine the amount of iron in your diet.

How much iron do you need?

For adolescent women aged 14-18, the U.S. Food and Nutrition Board (FNB) recommended daily amount is 15 mg (27 mg if pregnant, 10 mg if lactating). For adult women aged 19-50, the FNB recommends 18 mg/day (27 mg if pregnant, 9 mg if lactating). For women 51+ years old, the recommended daily amount is 8 mg.

Part of the reason why so many women fail to get the amount of iron they need is because one of the best sources of iron is red meat (especially liver) which also contains high levels of saturated fat. While leafy green vegetables and beans are also good sources of iron—and don't contain high levels saturated fat—the iron from plant foods is different to the iron from animal sources, and not absorbed as well by the body. Other foods rich in iron include poultry, seafood, dried fruit such as raisins and apricots, and iron-fortified cereals, breads, and pastas.

Good sources of iron

Food	Milligrams (mg) per serving
Breakfast cereals, fortified with 100% iron, 1 serving	18
Chocolate, dark, 45%-69% cacao solids, 3 ounces	7
Oysters, eastern, cooked with moist heat, 3 ounces	8
Sardines, with bone, 3 ounces	2
Tuna, light, canned in water, 3 ounces	1
Beef liver, pan fried, 3 ounces	5
Beef, braised bottom round, 3 ounces	2
Chicken, roasted, meat and skin, 3 ounces	1
Turkey, roasted, breast meat and skin, 3 ounces	1
White beans, canned, 1 cup	8
Lentils, boiled and drained, 1/2 cup	3
Kidney beans, canned, 1/2 cup	2
Chickpeas, boiled and drained, 1/2 cup	2
Spinach, boiled and drained, 1/2 cup	3
Tomatoes, canned, stewed, 1/2 cup	2
Broccoli, boiled and drained, 1/2 cup	1
Green peas, boiled, 1/2 cup	1
Raisins, seedless, 1/4 cup	1
Tofu, firm, 1/2 cup	3
Potato, medium, baked, including skin	2
Cashew nuts, oil roasted, 1 ounce (18 nuts)	2
Bread, whole wheat, 1 slice	1
Egg, large, hard boiled	1

Source: *National Institutes of Health*

The importance of folate (vitamin B9) for women of child-bearing age

Folate or vitamin B9 (also known as folic acid when used in fortified foods or taken as a supplement) is another nutrient that many women don't get enough of in their diets. Folate can greatly reduce the chance of neurological birth defects when taken before conception and during the first few weeks of pregnancy. Folate can also lower a woman's risk for heart disease and certain types of cancer, so even if you're not planning on getting pregnant (and many pregnancies are unplanned), it's an essential nutrient for every woman of childbearing age. In later life, folate can help your body manufacture estrogen during menopause.

Not getting enough folate in your diet can also impact your mood, leaving you feeling irritable and fatigued, affecting your concentration, and making you more susceptible to depression and headaches.

Nutrition tips to boost fertility

If you are planning a pregnancy, as well as getting sufficient folate in your diet, consider:

- **Avoiding alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine**, as they are known to decrease fertility.
- **Eating organic foods and grass-fed or free-range meat and eggs**, in order to limit pollutants and pesticides that may interfere with fertility.
- **Taking a prenatal supplement.** The most important supplements for fertility are folic acid, zinc, selenium, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin E, and vitamin C.
- **Not overlooking your partner's diet.** About 40 percent of fertility problems are on the male's side, so encourage your partner to add supplements such as zinc, vitamin C, calcium, and vitamin D.

How much folate do you need?

The U.S. FDA recommends that all women and teen girls who could become pregnant consume 400 mcg (micrograms) of folate or folic acid daily. Women who are pregnant should take 600 mcg, and those breastfeeding 500 mcg

Good sources include leafy green vegetables, fruit and fruit juice, nuts, beans and peas. Folic acid is also added to enrich many grain-based products such as cereals, bread, and pasta.

Good food sources of folate and folic acid

Food	Micrograms (mcg) per serving
Beef liver, braised, 3 ounces	215
Ground beef, 85% lean, cooked, 3 ounces	7
Chicken breast, roasted, 1/2 breast	3
Spinach, boiled, 1/2 cup	131
Asparagus, boiled, 4 spears	89
Brussels sprouts, frozen, boiled, 1/2 cup	78
Lettuce, romaine, shredded, 1 cup	64
Broccoli, chopped, frozen, cooked, 1/2 cup	52
Mustard greens, chopped, frozen, boiled, 1/2 cup	52
Black-eyed peas (cowpeas), boiled, 1/2 cup	105

Good food sources of folate and folic acid

Green peas, frozen, boiled, 1/2 cup	47
Kidney beans, canned, 1/2 cup	46
Breakfast cereals, fortified with 25% of the DV	100
Spaghetti, cooked, enriched, 1/2 cup	83
Bread, white, 1 slice	43
Yeast, baker's, 1/4 teaspoon	23
Tomato juice, canned, 3/4 cup	36
Orange juice, 3/4 cup	35
Orange, fresh, 1 small	23
Papaya, raw, cubed, 1/2 cup	27
Banana, 1 medium	24
Crab, Dungeness, 3 ounces	36
Fish, halibut, cooked, 3 ounces	12
Egg, whole, hard-boiled, 1 large	22
Milk, 1% fat, 1 cup	12

Source: *National Institutes of Health*

Eating to ease the symptoms of PMS

Experiencing bloating, cramping, and fatigue during the week or so before your period is often due to fluctuating hormones. Your diet can play an important role in alleviating these and other symptoms of PMS.

Eat foods high in iron and zinc. Some women find that foods such as red meat, liver, eggs, leafy green veggies, and dried fruit can help ease the symptoms of PMS.

Boost your calcium intake. Several studies have highlighted the role calcium-rich foods—such as milk, yoghurt, cheese, and leafy green vegetables—play in relieving PMS symptoms.

Avoid trans fats, deep fried foods, and sugar. All are inflammatory, which can trigger PMS symptoms.

Battle bloat by cutting out salt. If you tend to retain water and experiencing bloating, avoiding salty snacks, frozen dinners, and processed foods can make a big difference.

Watch out for food sensitivities. PMS is a common symptom of food sensitivities. Common culprits include dairy and wheat. Try cutting out the suspected food and see if it makes a difference in your symptoms.

Cut out caffeine and alcohol. Both worsen PMS symptoms, so avoid them during this time in your cycle.

Consider vitamin supplements. For some women, taking a daily multivitamin or supplementing with magnesium, vitamin B6, and vitamin E may help relieve cramps. But, again, supplements are not a substitute for a healthy, balanced diet. It's always better to get the vitamins and nutrients your body needs from the food you eat.

Add essential fatty acids to ease cramps. [Omega-3 fatty acids](#) have been shown to help with cramps. See if eating more fish or flaxseed eases your PMS symptoms.

Nutrition for pregnant or breastfeeding women

You only need about 300 extra calories per day to provide sufficient nutrition for your growing baby. However, gaining some weight is natural during pregnancy, and nursing can help with weight loss after the baby is born.

Nutrition tips for healthy pregnancy

Omega-3 fatty acids are essential for the neurological and early visual development of your baby and for making breast milk after birth. Aim for two weekly servings of cold water fish such as salmon, tuna, sardines, herring, or anchovies. Sardines are widely considered the safest and most sustainable fish to eat, while seaweed is a rich vegetarian source of Omega-3s.

Abstain from alcohol. No amount is safe for the baby.

Cut down on caffeine, which has been linked to a higher risk of miscarriage and can interfere with iron absorption.

Eat smaller, more frequent meals rather than a few large ones. This will help prevent and reduce morning sickness and heartburn.

Be cautious about foods that may be harmful to pregnant women. These include soft cheeses, sushi, deli meats, raw sprouts, and fish such as albacore tuna, swordfish, tilefish, and king mackerel that contain high levels of mercury.

High quality protein is also important to your baby's developing brain and nervous system. Opt for [high-quality protein](#) from fish, poultry, dairy, and plant-based protein sources rather than relying on just red meat.

Nutrition tips for healthy breastfeeding

Keep your caloric consumption a little higher to help your body maintain a steady milk supply.

Emphasize healthy sources of protein and calcium, which are higher in demand during lactation. Nursing women need about 20 grams more high-quality protein a day than they did before pregnancy to support milk production.

Take prenatal vitamin supplements, which are still helpful during breastfeeding, unless your physician tells you otherwise.

Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine. Just as with the pregnancy guidelines above, refrain from drinking and smoking, and reduce your caffeine intake.

If your baby develops an allergic reaction, you may need to adjust your diet. Common food allergens include cow's milk, eggs, wheat, fish, and citrus. For a cow's milk allergy, you can meet your calcium needs through other high calcium foods, such as kale, broccoli, or sardines.

Eating to ease the symptoms of menopause

For up to a decade prior to menopause, your reproductive system prepares to retire and your body shifts its production of hormones. By eating especially well as you enter your menopausal years, you can ease common symptoms.

Boost calcium intake (along with vitamin D and magnesium) to support bone health and prevent osteoporosis.

Limit wine, sugar, white flour products, and coffee to ease hot flashes.

Eat more good fats. [Omega-3 and omega-6 essential fatty acids](#) can help boost hormone production and give your skin a healthy glow. Evening primrose oil and blackcurrant oil are good sources of gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), an essential fatty acid that can help balance your hormones and alleviate hot flashes.

Try flaxseed for hot flashes. Flaxseed is rich in lignans, which help stabilize hormone levels and manage hot flashes. Add 1 to 2 tablespoons of ground flaxseed to your daily diet. Try sprinkling it on soups, salads, or main dishes.

Eat more soy. Soy products are high in phytoestrogens, plant-based estrogens that are similar to estrogen produced by the body. Some studies suggest that soy may help manage menopausal symptoms. Try natural soy sources such as soy milk, tofu, tempeh, and soy nuts.

Recommended reading

[Calcium and Milk: What's Best for Your Bones and Health?](#) - Learn about why calcium is important and the best food sources of calcium. (Harvard School of Public Health Nutrition Source)

[Calcium and Vitamin D: Important at Every Age](#) - The role of calcium in bone health and good food sources of calcium. (National Institutes of Health)

[Iron Dietary Supplement Fact Sheet](#) - Recommended intakes and good sources of iron. (National Institutes of Health)

[Iron Deficiency Anemia](#) - Symptoms and causes of iron deficiency anemia. (Mayo Clinic)

[Folate Dietary Supplement Fact Sheet](#) - Outlines the recommended intakes of folate as well as good food sources. (National Institutes of Health)

[Eating Healthy During Pregnancy](#) - Offers breakdowns of food groups with suggestions for food choices during pregnancy. (March of Dimes)

[Foods to avoid or limit during pregnancy](#) - Details the different foods considered to be potentially dangerous during pregnancy, and explains why these foods may pose a threat. (March of Dimes)

[Healthy Eating: A Guide for Teens](#) - Overview of good nutrition basics for teenage girls. This website also features articles on [Calcium](#), [Iron](#), and more. (Center for Young Women's Health, Children's Hospital Boston)

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