

# Healthy Eating

## Simple Ways to Plan, Enjoy, and Stick to a Healthy Diet



Healthy eating is not about strict dietary limitations, staying unrealistically thin, or depriving yourself of the foods you love. Rather, it's about feeling great, having more energy, improving your health, and boosting your mood. If you feel overwhelmed by all the conflicting nutrition and diet advice out there, you're not alone. It seems that for every expert who tells you a certain food is good for you, you'll find another saying exactly the opposite. But by using these simple tips, you can cut through the confusion and learn how to create—and stick to—a tasty, varied, and nutritious diet that is as good for your mind as it is for your body.

### What is a healthy diet?

Eating a healthy diet doesn't have to be overly complicated. While some specific foods or nutrients have been shown to have a beneficial effect on mood, it's your overall dietary pattern that is most important. The cornerstone of a healthy diet pattern should be to replace processed food with real food whenever possible. Eating food that is as close as possible to the way nature made it can make a huge difference to the way you think, look, and feel.

### The Healthy Eating Pyramid

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The Harvard Healthy Eating Pyramid represents the latest nutritional science. The widest part at the bottom is for things that are most important. The foods at the narrow top are those that should be eaten sparingly, if at all.

## The fundamentals of healthy eating

While some extreme diets may suggest otherwise, we all need a balance of protein, fat, carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins, and minerals in our diets to sustain a healthy body. You don't need to eliminate certain categories of food from your diet, but rather select the healthiest options from each category.

**Protein** gives you the energy to get up and go—and keep going—while also supporting mood and cognitive function. Too much protein can be harmful to people with kidney disease, but the latest research suggests that many of us need more high-quality protein, especially as we age. That doesn't mean you have to eat more animal products—a variety of plant-based sources of protein each day can ensure your body gets all the essential protein it needs. [Learn more »](#)

**Fat.** Not all fat is the same. While bad fats can wreck your diet and increase your risk of certain diseases, good fats protect your brain and heart. In fact, healthy fats—such as omega-3s—are vital to your physical and emotional health. Including more healthy fat in your diet can help improve your mood, boost your well-being, and even trim your waistline. [Learn more »](#)

**Fiber.** Eating foods high in dietary fiber (grains, fruit, vegetables, nuts, and beans) can help you stay regular and lower your risk for heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. It can also

improve your skin and even help you to lose weight. [Learn more »](#)

**Calcium.** As well as leading to osteoporosis, not getting enough calcium in your diet can also contribute to anxiety, depression, and sleep difficulties. Whatever your age or gender, it's vital to include calcium-rich foods in your diet, limit those that deplete calcium, and get enough magnesium and vitamins D and K to help calcium do its job. [Learn more »](#)

**Carbohydrates** are one of your body's main sources of energy. But most should come from complex, unrefined carbs (vegetables, whole grains, fruit) rather than sugars and refined carbs. Cutting back on white bread, pastries, starches, and sugar can prevent rapid spikes in blood sugar, fluctuations in mood and energy, and a build-up of fat, especially around your waistline. [Learn more »](#)

## Making the switch to a healthy diet

Switching to a healthy diet doesn't have to be an all or nothing proposition. You don't have to be perfect, you don't have to completely eliminate foods you enjoy, and you don't have to change everything all at once—that usually only leads to cheating or giving up on your new eating plan.

A better approach is to make a few small changes at a time. Keeping your goals modest can help you achieve more in the long term without feeling deprived or overwhelmed by a major diet overhaul. Think of planning a healthy diet as a number of small, manageable steps—like adding a salad to your diet once a day. As your small changes become habit, you can continue to add more healthy choices.

### Setting yourself up for success

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To set yourself up for success, try to keep things simple. Eating a healthier diet doesn't have to be complicated. Instead of being overly concerned with counting calories, for example, think of your diet in terms of color, variety, and freshness. Focus on avoiding packaged and processed foods and opting for more fresh ingredients whenever possible.

**Prepare more of your own meals.** Cooking more meals at home can help you take charge of what you're eating and better monitor exactly what goes into your food. You'll eat fewer calories and avoid the chemical additives, added sugar, and unhealthy fats of packaged and takeout foods that can leave you feeling tired, bloated, and irritable, and exacerbate symptoms of depression, stress, and anxiety.

**Make the right changes.** When cutting back on unhealthy foods in your diet, it's important to replace them with healthy alternatives. Replacing dangerous trans fats with healthy fats (such as switching fried chicken for grilled salmon) will make a positive difference to your

health. Switching animal fats for refined carbohydrates, though (such as switching your breakfast bacon for a donut), won't lower your risk for heart disease or improve your mood.

**Read the labels.** It's important to be aware of what's in your food as manufacturers often hide large amounts of sugar or unhealthy fats in packaged food, even food claiming to be healthy.

**Focus on how you feel after eating.** This will help foster healthy new habits and tastes. The healthier the food you eat, the better you'll feel after a meal. The more junk food you eat, the more likely you are to feel uncomfortable, nauseous, or drained of energy.

**Drink plenty of water.** Water helps flush our systems of waste products and toxins, yet many of us go through life dehydrated—causing tiredness, low energy, and headaches. It's common to mistake thirst for hunger, so staying well hydrated will also help you make healthier food choices.

## Moderation: important to any healthy diet

What is moderation? In essence, it means eating only as much food as your body needs. You should feel satisfied at the end of a meal, but not stuffed. For many of us, moderation means eating less than we do now. But it doesn't mean eliminating the foods you love. Eating bacon for breakfast once a week, for example, could be considered moderation if you follow it with a healthy lunch and dinner—but not if you follow it with a box of donuts and a sausage pizza.

**Try not to think of certain foods as “off-limits.”** When you ban certain foods, it's natural to want those foods more, and then feel like a failure if you give in to temptation. Start by reducing portion sizes of unhealthy foods and not eating them as often. As you reduce your intake of unhealthy foods, you may find yourself craving them less or thinking of them as only occasional indulgences.

**Think smaller portions.** Serving sizes have ballooned recently. When dining out, choose a starter instead of an entree, split a dish with a friend, and don't order supersized anything. At home, visual cues can help with portion sizes. Your serving of meat, fish, or chicken should be the size of a deck of cards and half a cup of mashed potato, rice, or pasta is about the size of a traditional light bulb. By serving your meals on smaller plates or in bowls, you can trick your brain into thinking it's a larger portion. If you don't feel satisfied at the end of a meal, add more leafy greens or round off the meal with fruit.

**Take your time.** It's important to slow down and think about food as nourishment rather than just something to gulp down in between meetings or on the way to pick up the kids. It actually takes a few minutes for your brain to tell your body that it has had enough food, so

eat slowly and stop eating before you feel full.

**Eat with others whenever possible.** Eating alone, especially in front of the TV or computer, often leads to mindless overeating.

**Limit snack foods in the home.** Be careful about the foods you keep at hand. It's more challenging to eat in moderation if you have unhealthy snacks and treats at the ready. Instead, surround yourself with healthy choices and when you're ready to reward yourself with a special treat, go out and get it then.

**Control emotional eating.** We don't always eat just to satisfy hunger. Many of us also turn to food to relieve stress or cope with unpleasant emotions such as sadness, loneliness, or boredom. But by learning healthier ways to manage stress and emotions, you can [regain control over the food you eat and your feelings](#).

### **It's not just what you eat, but when you eat**

**Eat breakfast, and eat smaller meals throughout the day.** A healthy breakfast can jumpstart your metabolism, while eating small, healthy meals keeps your energy up all day.

**Avoid eating late at night.** Try to eat dinner earlier and fast for 14-16 hours until breakfast the next morning. Studies suggest that eating only when you're most active and giving your digestive system a long break each day may help to regulate weight.

### **Add more fruit and vegetables to your diet**

Fruit and vegetables are low in calories and nutrient dense, which means they are packed with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and fiber. Focus on eating the recommended daily amount of **at least five servings** of fruit and vegetables and it will naturally fill you up and help you cut back on unhealthy foods. A serving is half a cup of raw fruit or veg or a small apple or banana, for example. Most of us need to double the amount we currently eat.

To increase your intake:

- Add antioxidant-rich berries to your favorite breakfast cereal
- Eat a medley of sweet fruit—oranges, mangos, pineapple, grapes—for dessert
- Swap your usual rice or pasta side dish for a colorful salad
- Instead of eating processed snack foods, snack on vegetables such as carrots, snow peas, or cherry tomatoes along with a spicy hummus dip or peanut butter

## How to make vegetables tasty

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While plain salads and steamed veggies can quickly become bland, there are plenty of ways to add taste to your vegetable dishes.

**Add color.** Not only do brighter, deeper colored vegetables contain higher concentrations of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, but they can vary the flavor and make meals more visually appealing. Add color using fresh or sundried tomatoes, glazed carrots or beets, roasted red cabbage wedges, yellow squash, or sweet, colorful peppers.

**Liven up salad greens.** Branch out beyond lettuce. Kale, arugula, spinach, mustard greens, broccoli, and Chinese cabbage are all packed with nutrients. To add flavor to your salad greens, try drizzling with olive oil, adding a spicy dressing, or sprinkling with almond slices, chickpeas, a little bacon, parmesan, or goat cheese.

**Satisfy your sweet tooth.** Naturally sweet vegetables—such as carrots, beets, sweet potatoes, yams, onions, bell peppers, and squash—add sweetness to your meals and reduce your cravings for added sugar. Add them to soups, stews, or pasta sauces for a satisfying sweet kick.

**Cook green beans, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and asparagus in new ways.** Instead of boiling or steaming these healthy sides, try grilling, roasting, or pan frying them with chili flakes, garlic, shallots, mushrooms, or onion. Or marinate in tangy lemon or lime before cooking.

## Plan quick and easy meals ahead

Healthy eating starts with great planning. You will have won half the healthy diet battle if you have a well-stocked kitchen, a stash of quick and easy recipes, and plenty of healthy snacks.

### Plan your meals by the week or even the month

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One of the best ways to have a healthy diet is to prepare your own food and eat in regularly. Pick a few healthy recipes that you and your family like and build a meal schedule around them. If you have three or four meals planned per week and eat leftovers on the other nights, you will be much farther ahead than if you are eating out or having frozen dinners most nights.

### Shop the perimeter of the grocery store

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In general, healthy eating ingredients are found around the outer edges of most grocery

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stores, while the center aisles are filled with processed and packaged foods that aren't good for you. Shop the perimeter of the store for most of your groceries (fresh fruits and vegetables, fish and poultry, whole grain breads and dairy products), add a few things from the freezer section (frozen fruits and vegetables), and visit the aisles for spices, oils, and whole grains (like rolled oats, brown rice, whole wheat pasta).

### Cook when you can

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Try to cook one or both weekend days or on a weekday evening and make extra to freeze or set aside for another night. Cooking ahead saves time and money, and it is gratifying to know that you have a home cooked meal waiting to be eaten.

Challenge yourself to come up with two or three dinners that can be put together without going to the store—utilizing things in your pantry, freezer, and spice rack. A delicious dinner of whole grain pasta with a quick tomato sauce or a quick and easy black bean quesadilla on a whole wheat flour tortilla (among endless other recipes) could act as your go-to meal when you are just too busy to shop or cook.

### Related videos

### Recommended reading



[Healthy Eating](#): A guide to the new nutrition - Harvard Medical School Special Health Report

[Healthy Diet: Eating with Mental Health in Mind](#) - Foods to eat and avoid for optimal mental health. (Mental Health America)

[Nutritional psychiatry: Your brain on food](#) - How the food you eat affects the way you feel. (Harvard Health Publications)

[Mastering the mindful meal](#) - Tips on how to eat more mindfully. (Brigham & Women's Hospital)

[Omega-3 Fats: An Essential Contribution](#) - Health benefits of omega-3 fatty acids, including

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the best food sources. (Harvard School of Public Health)

[The Truth About Fats](#) - Good fats, bad fats, and those in-between. (Harvard Health Publications)

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