



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 stabilizing 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 a tasty, varied, and healthy diet that is as good for your mind as it is for your body.

How can healthy eating improve your mental health?

We all know that eating right can help you maintain a healthy weight and avoid certain health problems, but your diet can also have a profound effect on your mood and sense of wellbeing. Studies have linked eating a typical Western diet—filled with processed meats, packaged meals, takeout food, and sugary snacks—with higher rates of depression, stress, bipolar disorder, and anxiety. Eating an unhealthy diet may even play a role in the development of mental health disorders such as ADHD, Alzheimer's disease, and schizophrenia, or in the increased risk of suicide in young people.

Eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, cooking meals at home, and reducing your intake of sugar and refined carbohydrates, on the other hand, may help to improve mood and lower your risk for mental health issues. If you have already been diagnosed with a mental health problem, eating well can even help to manage your symptoms and regain control of your life.

What constitutes 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



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. This Healthy Eating Pyramid shows daily exercise and weight control in the widest, most important category. Fats from healthy sources, such as plants, are in the wider part of the pyramid. Refined carbohydrates, such as white bread and white rice, are in the narrow top. Red meat should also be eaten sparingly, while fish, poultry, and eggs are healthier choices.

Adapted with permission from Healthy Eating: A guide to the new nutrition, a special health report published by Harvard Health Publications.

Building your healthy diet

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



(/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-protein.htm)

Protein gives us 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 »](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-protein.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-protein.htm)

Fat



(/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm)

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. Understanding how to include more healthy fat in your diet can help improve your mood, boost your well-being, and even trim your waistline. [Learn more »](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm)

Carbohydrates



(/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-carbs.htm)

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 that have been stripped of all bran, fiber, and nutrients. 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 »](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-carbs.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-carbs.htm)

Fiber



(/articles/healthy-eating/high-fiber-foods.htm)

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. Depending on your age and gender, nutrition experts recommend you eat at least 21 to 38 grams of fiber each day for optimal health. Unfortunately, most of us aren't eating even half that amount. [Learn more »](/articles/healthy-eating/high-fiber-foods.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/high-fiber-foods.htm)

Calcium



(/articles/healthy-eating/calcium-and-bone-health.htm)

Your body uses calcium to build healthy bones and teeth, keep them strong as you age, send messages through the nervous system, and regulate the heart's rhythm. 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 »](#) (/articles/healthy-eating/calcium-and-bone-health.htm)

Making the switch to healthy eating

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.

To set yourself up for success, think about planning a healthy diet as a number of small, manageable steps—like adding a salad to your diet once a day—rather than one big drastic change. As your small changes become habit, you can continue to add more healthy choices.

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.

Simplify. Instead of being overly concerned with counting calories, think of your diet in terms of color, variety, and freshness. Focus on avoiding packaged and processed foods and opting for more fresh ingredients.

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 more healthy 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 green vegetables or round off the meal with fruit.

Take your time. 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.

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 (rather than the standard three large meals) keeps your energy up all day.
- **Avoid eating 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.

How to 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 berries to breakfast cereals
- Eat fruit for dessert
- Swap your usual side dish for a salad
- Snack on vegetables such as carrots, snow peas, or cherry tomatoes instead of processed snack foods

Make your meals colorful

The brighter, deeper colored fruits and vegetables contain higher concentrations of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants—and different colors provide different benefits.

Greens. Branch out beyond lettuce. Kale, mustard greens, broccoli, and Chinese cabbage are all packed with calcium, magnesium, iron, potassium, zinc, and vitamins A, C, E, and K.

Sweet vegetables. Naturally sweet vegetables—such as carrots, beets, sweet potatoes, yams, onions, and squash—add healthy sweetness to your meals and reduce your cravings for added sugar.

Fruit. Fruit is a tasty, satisfying way to fill up on fiber, vitamins, and antioxidants. Berries are cancer-fighting, apples provide fiber, oranges and mangos offer vitamin C, and so on.

Related HelpGuide articles

- [Healthy Diet and Nutrition Tips for Women: \(/articles/healthy-eating/diet-and-nutrition-tips-for-women.htm\)](/articles/healthy-eating/diet-and-nutrition-tips-for-women.htm) Eating Right to Look and Feel Your Best at Every Stage of Life
- [Healthy Food for Kids: \(/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-food-for-kids.htm\)](/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-food-for-kids.htm) Easy Tips to Help Your Children and Teens Eat Healthier
- [Emotional Eating vs. Mindful Eating: \(/articles/diets/emotional-eating.htm\)](/articles/diets/emotional-eating.htm) How to Stop Stress Eating and Satisfy Your Needs with Mindfulness

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