

## The Basic Principles of Healthy Eating

How much time and care do you devote to your choices about nutrition? Just like a car, your body needs optimum fuel for its best performance and longevity. What you eat and drink *does* matter both now, for maximum energy and comfort, and later, to help reduce the risk of certain diseases.

### Aim for variety

If you ask a certified dietitian for her recommendations for healthy eating, you might find that she promotes a certain eating plan such as the USDA Food Guide Pyramid, the Mediterranean Pyramid, the Mayo Clinic Diet or a blend of several approaches. How do you choose? First, you can try to include foods that the most popular dietary guidelines have in common, then you can adjust your choices based on the plan that best suits your preferences and your particular health needs. Just be sure to moderate sugar, salt, saturated fat and processed foods on any nutritional plan.

The bottom line is to eat a varied diet that includes:

- whole grains
- vegetables and fruits
- low-fat dairy products
- lean meats, legumes and eggs
- healthy fats from nuts and plant oils

Aim not only for a variety of kinds of foods, but also colors. Registered dietician Rick Hall of Phoenix, Ariz., advises people to eat “all different kinds of fruits and vegetables of all shapes, colors, textures and tastes.” You can easily add color to your meals. Here are a few suggestions:

- Toss a handful of blueberries on your breakfast cereal.
- Add roasted red peppers and fresh spinach to your sandwich at lunch.
- Snack on carrot sticks, cauliflower, oranges or grapes.
- Bake a sweet potato to have at dinner with steamed broccoli and whole grain pasta topped with sautéed yellow peppers.

### Choose moderation in portion size

Confused about portions? Although your total caloric needs depend on your activity level, gender, age, current weight, etc., a good measure to go by, in general, is your plate. Fill half of your plate with vegetables and fruit, one-fourth with protein (meat, eggs, legumes) and the other fourth with grains (bread, pasta, etc.) If you want seconds, allow yourself another plate filled with vegetables and fruit only.

### Watch what you drink

Remember that what you drink is part of your nutrition picture as well. Let water be your beverage of choice whenever possible. Low-fat milk, soymilk and orange juice are ways to cover some of the food categories on many dietary guides. Try to moderate sugary juices and sodas. If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation as well.

### Be realistic

Ideally, you would only eat when you are hungry, never overeat, avoid junk food, etc. *Normal* eating means that you sometimes eat when you aren't hungry or that you sometimes eat too much. *Normal* eating means that you will occasionally eat something junky just because it tastes good or because it comforts you. That's just the way you are, as a normal human being. Rather than become rigid about eating, give yourself room in your nutritional plan to be human. Allow yourself treats, even junky ones, every once in a while.

*Any* effort you make to build your nutrition around whole grains, vegetables, fruits, lean meats, legumes, low-fat dairy products and healthy fats can improve your health.

### Resources

American Dietetic Association  
[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

*The American Dietetic Association Complete Food and Nutrition Guide* by Roberta Larson Duyff. Wiley, 2002.

*Discovering Nutrition* by Paul Insel, Don Ross and Elaine Turner. Jones and Bartlett, 2003.

Food and Nutrition Information Center (FNIC)  
[www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/)

Sources: *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2000* by the Nutrition Information Resource Center ([www.usda.gov/cnpp/](http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/)); *The Food Guide Pyramid—Beyond the Basic 4* by Julie Garden-Robinson. USDA Human Nutrition Information Service, 1992; *Nutrition* by Rick Hall, RD.

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