

PATIENT EDUCATION



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists
WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE PHYSICIANS

Healthy Eating

Eating well is one of the best things you can do to stay healthy. Making good food choices can give you more energy, improve your physical health and mental well-being, and decrease your risk of disease.

This pamphlet explains

- the benefits of healthy eating
- good food choices
- balancing your diet
- a healthy weight for you

Benefits of Healthy Eating

A well-balanced diet is a key to good health. Your body needs a balanced supply of **nutrients** to grow, replace worn-out tissue, and provide energy. Not getting enough of these important nutrients can affect your health. But eating too much food and too many **calories** can lead to health problems.

Obesity is a major health concern in the United States. Obesity increases the risk of **cardiovascular disease**, **diabetes mellitus**, **high blood pressure**, and certain types of cancer, including breast cancer, colon cancer, and cancer of the **uterus**. Obesity also is associated with **infertility**. By maintaining a healthy lifestyle that combines good food choices and exercise, many of these conditions can be prevented or controlled.

Food Choices

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's website "ChooseMyPlate" (www.choosemyplate.gov) can help you plan a healthy diet. This site explains the five food groups:

1. Grains—Foods made with grains such as wheat, rice, oats, or barley are all grain foods. Grain foods include bread, pasta, oatmeal, cereal, and tortillas. Make one half of the grain foods that you eat each day whole grains. Whole grains are those that have not been processed and include the whole grain kernel. Whole grains include steel-cut oatmeal, brown rice, and barley.
2. Fruits—Fruits can be fresh, canned, frozen, or dried. Juice that is 100 percent fruit juice also counts, but fresh, whole fruit is best.
3. Vegetables—Vegetables can be raw or cooked, frozen, canned, dried, or 100 percent vegetable juice. Eat a variety of different-colored vegetables— orange, red, green, and yellow.
4. Protein foods—Protein foods include meat, poultry, seafood, beans and peas, eggs, processed soy products, nuts, and seeds. Include a variety of proteins in your diet and choose lean or low-fat meat and poultry.
5. Dairy foods—Milk and products made from milk, such as cheese, yogurt, and ice cream, make up the dairy group. Choose fat-free or low-fat (1 percent) varieties.

Some people have food allergies, cannot digest certain foods, or are unable to tolerate certain foods because of an **autoimmune disorder**. For information on food intolerances and for tips on how to manage them in your meal planning, go to www.nutrition.gov/nutrition-and-health-issues/digestive-disorders. It may be helpful to see a dietitian if you have special nutrition needs.

Balancing Your Diet

Every diet should include proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. In recent years, a lot of attention has been paid to special diets that emphasize one nutrient over another. The truth is, there is no magic formula for a healthy diet. The key is to try to balance your diet by eating a variety of healthy foods.

Protein

Protein provides the nutrients your body needs to grow and repair muscles and other tissues. Protein is found in the following foods:

- Beef, pork, and fish
- Poultry
- Eggs
- Beans and peas
- Nuts and seeds

Make sure that you eat a variety of protein foods. Choose meats and poultry that are lower in fat, such as chicken and lean cuts of beef. Fish and shellfish are good sources of protein and contain healthy fats.

Women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy should avoid certain types of fish that are high in mercury—bigeye tuna, king mackerel, marlin, orange roughy, shark, swordfish, and tilefish. Limit albacore tuna to 6 ounces a week.

For vegetarians, protein can be found in nuts, seeds, nut butters, and soy products such as tempeh and tofu. Vegetarians who include dairy products in their diets also can get protein from milk. Eggs are another source of protein that some vegetarians eat.

Fats

The body needs a certain amount of fat to function normally. Some types of fats, called omega-3 fatty acids, play an important role in brain development. Fats also are essential to the function of the **immune system**, aid in blood clotting, and help your body use vitamins A, D, E, and K.

There are different types of fat found in foods. Some have health benefits, while others do not. You should be aware of the different types of fat in your diet:

- Saturated fats come mainly from meat and dairy products. They tend to be solid when chilled. Examples include butter and lard. There also are two plant-based saturated fats—palm oil and coconut oil.

- Unsaturated fats tend to be liquid and come mostly from plants and vegetables. Olive, canola, peanut, sunflower, and fish oils are all unsaturated fats.
- Trans fats are unsaturated fats that have been chemically processed to be solid at room temperature. This is done to make foods last longer and give them better flavor. Vegetable shortenings, margarines, crackers, cookies, and snack foods like potato chips often contain trans fats.

Too much saturated fat and trans fat in your diet can increase your **cholesterol** level, which can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease. Most of the fat that you eat should be in the form of unsaturated plant oils.

Keep in mind that all types of fat are high in calories. Ounce for ounce, fat has more than double the calories as the same amount of protein or carbohydrates. Fat that your body does not need right away is stored as fat tissue. Fat is converted into energy when your body uses up more calories than you eat. If you do not use up these calories, the fat stores build up. Too much body fat can lead to several health problems, including diabetes, heart disease, and joint problems.

The amount of fat you should eat is based on your age, sex, and level of physical activity. Fats should make up no more than 20 to 35 percent of an adult's diet. For most people, that is about 44 to 78 grams of fat daily. If you exercise more than 30 minutes a day, you may be able to consume more than this amount.

Most people in the United States get more than the recommended amount of fat per day. To help reduce your overall fat intake, limit your intake of foods that are high in saturated fat, such as full-fat dairy products and meats. Drink low-fat milk and eat low-fat meats, such as poultry. You also can decrease your fat intake by changing the way you prepare foods:

- Broil, bake, poach, or steam your food instead of frying or sauteing it.
- Skim liquid fat from soups.
- Trim all fat from meats.
- Remove skin from poultry.

Limit your intake of processed low-fat foods. Often, low-fat cookies and chips are high in sugar and salt to make them taste good. Read food labels carefully.

Carbohydrates

All carbohydrates are broken down into **glucose** (blood sugar), the body's main fuel that powers all of its activities. There are two types of carbohydrates: 1) simple and 2) complex. Simple carbohydrates provide a quick energy boost because they are digested and absorbed rapidly. They are found in naturally sweet foods like fruits and also can be added to foods in the form of table sugar, honey, and syrup. Simple carbohydrates often are high in calories. It is best to limit your intake of simple carbohydrates to those found naturally in food. Avoid sugary drinks and foods with added sugar.

Complex carbohydrates include dietary fiber and starches. It takes your body longer to process them, so complex carbohydrates provide longer-lasting energy than simple carbohydrates. Complex carbohydrates are found in bread, rice, pasta, some fruits, and starchy vegetables such as potatoes and corn.

Fiber is found in plant foods. It is the part of the plant that your body cannot digest. Fiber passes relatively unchanged through your digestive system. It can help prevent constipation by adding bulk to the stool, making it easier to pass. You should eat about 25 grams of fiber daily. The following foods are good sources of fiber:

- Fruits (especially dried fruits, berries, oranges, and apples and peaches with the skin)
- Vegetables (such as dried beans and peas and leafy vegetables like spinach and kale)
- Whole-grain products (such as whole-wheat bread or brown rice)

Reading Food Labels

All packaged foods must be labeled clearly with nutrition information. Reading labels will tell you how many grams of fat and how many calories are in each serving.

Serving Size: Amount of food served and eaten.

Calories: Amount of energy the food supplies in one serving.

Nutrients: A list of the nutrients the product contains. Nutrients often listed here are fat (saturated and trans), cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrate (dietary fiber and sugars), and protein.

Total Fat: The amount of fat in one serving.

Saturated Fat: This type of fat comes mainly from meat and milk products.

Trans Fat: Trans fat is made when liquid oil is turned into solid fat like shortening and hard margarine.

Percent Daily Values:

The percentage of nutrients based on the recommended amount you should have daily. It is based on a diet of 2,000 calories.

Nutrition Facts			
Serving Size: 1 package (28g)			
Servings Per Container: 1			
Amount Per Serving			
Calories 100	Calories from Fat 10		
% Daily Value*			
Total Fat 1g	2%		
Saturated Fat .5g	2%		
Trans Fat 0g			
Cholesterol 0g	0%		
Sodium 450mg	19%		
Total Carbohydrate 22g	7%		
Dietary Fiber 2g	8%		
Sugars 0g			
Protein 3g			
Vitamin A 0%	Vitamin C 0%		
Calcium 0%	Iron 3%		
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:			
	Calorie	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Sat. Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g
Calories per gram:			
	Fat 9	Carbohydrate 4	Protein 4

Fiber also helps maintain a stable blood sugar level because fiber passes slowly through the digestive tract. Foods that do this are described as “low-glycemic” because they do not cause the blood glucose level to spike. Eating low-glycemic foods can help you feel full and reduce the feeling of hunger, which can aid in weight loss. Low-glycemic foods also may help reduce cholesterol levels and prevent diabetes.

Vitamins and Minerals

Most women need to be sure they get enough calcium, iron, and folic acid and not too much sodium. Some women may need more or less of these vitamins and minerals, such as women who are pregnant or in *menopause*, or who have certain health problems, such as diabetes or high blood pressure.

Calcium and Vitamin D

Bone is living tissue made up of calcium-phosphate and a protein called collagen. Calcium is needed for healthy bones. Women age 19 to 50 need 1,000 milligrams (mg) of calcium per day. Women older than 50 need 1,200 mg per day. Three cups of skim milk daily provide about 1,000 mg of calcium. Other dairy foods, such as yogurt and cheese, also are high in calcium. Non-dairy sources of calcium include:

- dark greens (collards, spinach, turnip greens, kale, and broccoli)
- soybeans and some soy products
- certain canned fish and seafood (sardines, pink salmon with bone, blue crab, and clams)
- cereals and juices with added calcium

It also is important to get enough vitamin D, which helps the body absorb calcium. You need 600 international units (IU) of vitamin D a day if you are 19 to 70 and 800 IU if you are older than 70. Good sources are milk fortified with vitamin D and fish that have a lot of unsaturated fat, such as salmon. Exposure to sunlight also converts a chemical in the skin to vitamin D.

Iron

Iron is needed to make new red blood cells. The most common form of *anemia* is caused by a lack of iron. Women may become anemic because of loss of blood during menstruation or childbirth. Anemia may make you feel tired and weak.

Most women of childbearing age need 18 mg of iron per day. During pregnancy, women need 27 mg of iron daily.

During and after menopause, women may not need such high levels of iron. If you are 51 or older, you need only 8 mg of iron per day. One serving of most breakfast cereals with added iron should provide enough of this daily requirement. Other foods that are good sources of iron include:

- spinach
- beans (soybeans, white beans, lentils, kidney beans, chick peas)
- clams and oysters
- meats (beef, duck, lamb)
- organ meats (liver, giblets)

It helps to eat foods rich in vitamin C, like oranges and tomatoes, at the same meal with an iron-rich food. Vitamin C helps your body use iron better.

Folic Acid

Folic acid is a B vitamin that also is known as folate. Folic acid supports the growth and functioning of red blood cells and other cells. It also helps prevent major **birth defects** of a baby's brain and spine called **neural tube defects (NTDs)**.

Current guidelines recommend that pregnant women get at least 600 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid per day, but it is hard to get enough from your diet alone. To reach this goal, take a prenatal vitamin with at least 400 mcg of folic acid every day and eat foods rich in this vitamin. The combination of folic acid in your vitamin and in your diet should help you reach the 600 mcg goal. Ideally, you should start taking a vitamin with folic acid before you get pregnant.

Folic acid is added to certain foods (breads, cereal, pasta, rice, and flour) and is found in leafy dark-green vegetables, citrus fruits, and beans. Even though these are good sources of folic acid, all women of child-bearing age should take a daily vitamin containing 400 mcg of folic acid. The vitamin label may show this amount as 667 mcg dietary folate equivalents (DFE).

Sodium

Sodium is linked to high blood pressure. Sodium should be used in small amounts—about 2,300 mg, or about one teaspoon of table salt, a day. If you are older than 50 or have diabetes, high blood pressure, or kidney disease, you should have no more than 1,500 mg, or about two-thirds of a teaspoon, of salt per day.

Choose and prepare foods with little salt. Watch your intake of processed foods, such as soups, salad dressings, and baked goods, which often contain large amounts of sodium. You can check the sodium content of a product by looking on its food label.

Healthy Weight

Your weight is the result of how many calories you eat versus the number of calories you burn. You should keep your weight at the range that is healthy for your height. The **body mass index (BMI)** is used to compare a person's height with her weight to see if she is overweight. A BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is normal. A person with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 is overweight. A person with a score of 30 or higher is obese. To find out your BMI, go to https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm.

If your weight is not in the normal range, try to lose the extra pounds. Even a modest weight loss of 5 to 10 percent of your body weight can have a positive effect. The best way to lose weight is to use up more calories than you take in. You can do this by getting regular exercise combined with healthy eating.

Finally...

Healthy eating is one of the best things you can do to improve your health. Eat a variety of foods. Balance the food you eat with exercise for weight control. When making food choices, keep the following tips in mind:

- Make one half of your plate fruits and vegetables.
- Switch to skim milk or 1 percent milk.
- Make one half of your grains whole grains.
- Vary your protein sources. Eat fish twice a week and choose lean meats and poultry. Vegetarians can get protein from a wide variety of plant-based foods such as nuts, seeds, and soy products.
- Choose foods and drinks with little or no added sugars.
- Limit your intake of salt.
- Eat fewer foods with saturated or trans fats.
- Enjoy your food, but eat less.
- Limit alcohol (one drink a day for women).

Glossary

Anemia: Abnormally low levels of red blood cells in the bloodstream. Most cases are caused by iron deficiency (lack of iron).

Autoimmune Disorder: A condition in which the body attacks its own tissues.

Birth Defects: Physical problems that are present at birth.

Body Mass Index (BMI): A number calculated from height and weight. BMI is used to determine whether a person is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese.

Calories: Units of heat used to express the fuel or energy value of food.

Cardiovascular Disease: Disease of the heart and blood vessels.

Cholesterol: A natural substance that is a building block for cells and hormones. This substance helps carry fat through the blood vessels for use or storage in other parts of the body.

Diabetes Mellitus: A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

Folic Acid: A vitamin that reduces the risk of certain birth defects when taken before and during pregnancy.

Glucose: A sugar in the blood that is the body's main source of fuel.

High Blood Pressure: Blood pressure above the normal level. Also called hypertension.

Immune System: The body's natural defense system against viruses and bacteria that cause disease.

Infertility: The inability to get pregnant after 1 year of having regular sexual intercourse without the use of birth control.

Menopause: The time when a woman's menstrual periods stop permanently. Menopause is confirmed after 1 year of no periods.

Neural Tube Defects (NTDs): Birth defects that result from a problem in development of the brain, spinal cord, or their coverings.

Nutrients: Nourishing substances found in food, such as vitamins and minerals.

Obesity: A condition characterized by excessive body fat.

Uterus: A muscular organ in the female pelvis. During pregnancy, this organ holds and nourishes the fetus. Also called the womb.

This information is designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. For ACOG's complete disclaimer, visit www.acog.org/WomensHealth-Disclaimer.

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