

Healthy eating



Despite what you see in some diet books and TV programmes, healthy eating is really straightforward.

Meals based on starchy foods such as rice and pasta, with plenty of fruit and vegetables (and not too much fat, salt or sugar) will give you all the nutrients you need, without the extra calories you don't.

When it comes to a healthy diet, balance is the key to getting it right. We all need to provide our bodies with the energy and nutrients required to function well and feel great.

That means eating a wide variety of foods in the right proportion, so that over time we get all the nutrients we need to keep ourselves healthy.

Trouble is, achieving that balance can be tricky. Modern life doesn't always make it easy. After a long day it can be tempting to grab the first ready meal on the supermarket shelf, which is OK occasionally. But if you read the nutritional labels on these foods, you'll see that many ready meals contain high levels of fat, sugar and salt, and not much fibre, vitamins and minerals. If you eat ready meals too often, they'll throw your diet out of balance.

Food groups

All the food we eat can be divided into five groups. A healthy diet means that you eat the right balance of these groups.

They are:

- Starchy foods, such as rice, wholewheat pasta and bread, and potatoes.
- Fruit and vegetables.
- Meat, fish, eggs and beans.
- Milk and dairy foods.
- Foods containing fat and sugar.

Most of us in Britain eat too much fat, sugar and salt, and not enough fruit and vegetables or starchy foods and wholegrains.

You can read more on each of the five food groups, as well as great recipes and cooking tips, at the Food Standards Agency's Eatwell website (see Useful links).

Starchy foods

Starchy foods such as bread, cereals, potatoes, pasta, maize and cornbread are a crucial part of a healthy diet. They contain carbohydrates, which are an essential source of energy. Starchy foods are fuel for your body.

In a healthy meal, starchy foods should make up around a third of everything we eat. That means we should base our meals on these foods.

Try to choose wholegrain or wholemeal varieties, such as brown rice, wholewheat pasta and brown wholemeal bread. They contain more fibre (also called 'roughage'), and usually more vitamins and minerals than white flour or white rice.

There is also starch in beans, lentils, peas, breadfruit and cassava.

Most of us need to include more starchy foods in our diets. Try having more wholewheat pasta or brown rice with your meal, and less sauce. Choose wholegrain cereals or porridge for breakfast.

Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables are a vital source of vitamins and minerals and it's advised that we eat five portions of them a day.

There's good evidence that people who eat five portions a day are at lower risk of coronary heart disease, stroke and certain cancers.

What's more, eating five portions is not as hard as it might sound. Just one apple, banana, pear or similar sized fruit is one portion. A slice of pineapple or melon is one portion and three heaped tablespoons of vegetables is another.

A glass of fruit juice also counts as one portion. But more than one cannot be counted towards your five a day. Juice only counts as one of your five a day, no matter how much you drink.

Having a sliced banana with your morning cereal is a quick way to get one portion. Swap your mid-morning biscuit for a tangerine, and add a side salad to your lunch. Add a portion of vegetables to dinner, and snack on dried fruit in the evening to reach your five a day.

You can read more on the NHS 5 A DAY website (see Useful links).

Meat, fish, eggs and beans

These foods are all sources of protein, which is essential for growth and repair of the body.

Around 15% of the calories we eat each day should come from protein.

Meat is a good source of protein, as well as vitamins and minerals such as iron, zinc and B vitamins. It is also one of the main sources of vitamin B12. Try to eat lean cuts of meat whenever possible to cut down on fat, and make sure you always cook meat thoroughly.

Fish another important source of protein. There is evidence that people who eat two portions or more a week of oily fish such as sardines, mackerel, herring and salmon are at lower risk of heart disease. That's because oily fish contain high levels of a 'good fat' called omega-3.

However, women who plan to have children, or are pregnant or breastfeeding, should eat no more than two portions of oily fish each week.

Eggs and pulses – including beans, nuts and seeds – are also great sources of protein. But eggs and some nuts contain high levels of fat, so eat them in moderation.

Milk and dairy foods

Milk and dairy foods such as cheese and yoghurt are also sources of protein. They also contain calcium, which helps keep bones healthy.

But some dairy products have a high saturated fat content, and eating too much saturated fat is linked to heart disease. To enjoy the health benefits of dairy without eating too much fat, try using skimmed milk, low-fat hard cheeses or cottage cheese, and low-fat yoghurt instead of cream or soured cream.

Fat and sugar

Of all the five food groups, it is our consumption of foods that are high in fat and sugar that does the most to make our diet unbalanced.

Fats and sugar are powerful sources of energy for the body. But when we eat too much of them we consume more energy than we burn, meaning we put on weight. Obesity – linked to diabetes, heart disease, stroke and certain cancers – can be the result.

But did you know that there are bad fats and good fats?

Saturated fat – contained in high levels in such foods as pies, meat products, sausages, cakes and biscuits – can raise your cholesterol level, and increase your risk of heart disease. Most of us in the UK eat too much saturated fat, putting us at risk of health problems.

Unsaturated fats, on the other hand, can lower cholesterol and provide us with the essential fatty acids needed to stay healthy. Oily fish, nuts and seeds, avocados, olive oils and vegetable oils are sources of unsaturated fat.

There are two kinds of food containing sugar, too. Sugar occurs naturally in foods such as fruit and milk. But sugar is added to processed foods such as fizzy drinks, cakes, biscuits, chocolate, pastries, ice cream and jam. It's also contained in some ready-made savoury foods such as pasta sauces and baked beans.

It's the foods with added sugar foods that most of us need to cut down on. Instead of a fizzy drink, have a half and half mixture of fruit juice and water. Make a pasta sauce yourself instead of buying it ready made. Have dried fruit for a snack instead of a chocolate bar.

The Eatwell plate

Balancing your diet will get easier the more you do it. To help you to see the balance between the five food groups, the Food Standards Agency has produced the Eatwell plate.

Try to divide each day's food in the proportions that you see on the plate, and you'll be well on the way to a healthy diet.

The eatwell plate

If you want to get the balance of your diet right, use the eatwell plate.

The eatwell plate makes healthy eating easier to understand by showing the types and proportions of foods we need to have a healthy and well balanced diet.



The eatwell plate shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group. This includes everything you eat during the day, including snacks.

So, try to eat:



plenty of fruit and vegetables



plenty of bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods – choose

wholegrain varieties whenever you can



some milk and dairy foods



some meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein



just a small amount of foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar

Look at the eatwell plate to see how much of your food should come from each food group. You don't need to get the balance right at every meal. But try to get it right over time such as a whole day or week.

Try to choose options that are lower in fat, salt and sugar when you can.