



What Is Proper Nutrition?

While proper nutrition differs from person to person, a solid foundation can be established by eating a balanced diet as outlined in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

By Mindy Hermann, MBA, RDN

IN THIS ERA of personalized nutrition, we're learning more and more about how each of us may have different nutrition needs. For example, one person might thrive on a diet high in carbohydrates, while another might fare better with more protein. One person might absorb certain vitamins and minerals easily while another does not. However, despite our individual differences, all of us fall within a general range of nutrition needs that can be met by eating a balanced diet with a variety of foods.

The U.S. government has been issuing Dietary Guidelines for Americans every five years since the 1970s to educate the population and policymakers about food and nutrition. The guidelines also address the health of American adults, since about half of them have one or more diet-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, overweight and obesity, some cancers and poor bone health, many of which (obesity in particular) can trigger or worsen symptoms of an autoimmune disease.

While these guidelines provide a broad framework and are not specifically tailored to individuals, they create a solid foundation for a basic diet that can be adapted to individual needs and intolerances. A revision of the current guidelines will be released sometime in 2020.

Key Recommendations

Following are the key recommendations from the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans:

Follow a healthy eating pattern throughout life. Good nutrition matters at all ages. This means making smart food and beverage choices in childhood, the teen years and throughout adulthood. It's easy to make less healthy food choices as a teen or young adult or when life gets busy, but months and years of a poor diet can impact health down the road. Eating a balanced diet at the right calorie level for a person's metabolism and activity level, along with getting regular physical activity, can maintain a healthy body

weight, provide good nutrition and lessen the chances of chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes.

Choose a variety of foods with a lot of nutrition per serving. The body needs a certain number of calories to maintain weight; eating too many calories over a prolonged period of time causes weight gain and can eventually lead to obesity. The goal is to choose foods with plenty of vitamins, minerals and key nutrients but without too many calories, and to have indulgent foods with a lot of calories and not much nutrition occasionally and only in small portions. Here is an example: A small baked potato has fewer than 100 calories, is satiating and supplies fiber and several key vitamins and minerals. A one-ounce bag of potato chips has less potato and more oil, supplying about 160 calories, a lot of which comes from fat, and lower amounts of important nutrients. Potato chips are also not as filling as a baked potato.

Limit calories from foods with ingredients detrimental to health. In addition to recommending high nutrition foods, the guidelines caution against ingredients and nutrients that can be detrimental to health. These include sugars people add to foods and beverages such as breakfast cereal and coffee, as well as sugars added to processed foods and beverages. Some processed foods and beverages are surprisingly high in added sugar. A single serving bottle of a sugar-sweetened soft drink may have 12 or so teaspoons of sugar, much more than a person would add to a drink at home. Foods high in saturated fats include well-marbled beef, sausage, high-fat cuts of pork, whole milk and whole milk dairy products, coconut and many fast food entrées. Restaurant foods and fast food tend to be higher in sodium (the main mineral in salt) than foods prepared at home. Fresh foods generally have less sodium than packaged canned or frozen foods and take-out foods from the deli counter or buffet.

Switch to healthier food and beverage choices. Many foods and beverages can be swapped for healthier options without making major changes in eating habits. Some swaps cut calories. For example, choosing skim milk instead of whole milk saves about 80 calories, choosing oat ring cereal instead of granola saves at least 100 calories, and choosing seltzer over sugar-sweetened soft drinks can save up to 200 calories. Other swaps can reduce saturated fat such as using a lean cut of beef instead of a fatty one.

Fundamentals of Good Nutrition

A healthy and balanced diet includes selections from six different food groups: vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy, protein

and oils. Body size, desired weight status (gaining, maintaining, losing) and age affect the body's metabolism and the number of calories and amount of food a person should eat.

The vegetable family includes dark green leafy vegetables such as kale, spinach and Romaine lettuce; red and orange vegetables such as red peppers, beets, carrots and sweet potatoes; white vegetables like cauliflower, onions and turnips; kidney beans, chickpeas, split peas and other legumes; and starchy vegetables such as potatoes and yams. Different colors mean different beneficial nutrients and plant compounds, which is why the guidelines call for eating a variety of vegetables every day.

As with vegetables, different colors of fruit provide different beneficial plant compounds. Enjoy red-skinned and green-skinned apples; red, green and black grapes; white and yellow peaches and nectarines; berries of all types and colors; and the various citrus fruits available in the winter months. Unsweetened frozen fruits are picked and frozen on the farm, so they have just as much nutrition as fresh fruit and are a great option when fresh fruit is not in season.

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The grains family includes both whole grains and refined grains, and a balanced diet includes both. Whole wheat is a well-known whole grain used in bread, cereal and pasta. Whole grains such as brown rice and quinoa are popular in side dishes. Refined white flour is a common ingredient in bread, cereal, pasta and pizza. In the U.S., refined white flour is fortified with several important vitamins and minerals. However, many people eat too many refined grains in large portions of indulgence foods such as cake, cookies, crackers, pizza and pasta.

People who cannot tolerate gluten, the main protein in wheat, can choose from a wide variety of gluten-free alternatives, including brown or white rice, quinoa and “ancient grains.” Gluten-free pasta, desserts and bread incorporate flours made from rice, beans, peas and other gluten-free ingredients. Portion control is extremely important since gluten-free options often provide as many or more calories and less nutrition than their conventional counterparts.

In dairy products, fat-free or lower-fat dairy products are preferred over full-fat products to manage calories and saturated fat. Dairy products provide protein, calcium and other extremely important nutrients. The guidelines recommend three daily servings.

People who cannot tolerate either the carbohydrate (lactose) or protein (casein) in traditional dairy products have multiple options, including lactose-free dairy products treated to break down lactose or A2 milk obtained from cows that produce only a better-tolerated form of casein. The dairy aisle also offers a broad range of plant-based milks, beverages, yogurts and cheeses. Plant-based products generally are not nutritionally equal to or better than products made from cow or goat milk. They tend to have less protein, along with a form of calcium that is harder for the body to absorb. Still, many people prefer to switch to plant-based products.

Protein foods are derived from animals (lean meats and poultry, fish and seafood, eggs) and from plants such as beans and peas, nuts, seeds, soy products and plant-based meat alternatives. Although protein is widely called out on food and beverage packages, most people in the U.S. and Canada get enough protein in their diet without having to eat overly large portions. The guidelines recommend about half a pound (before cooking) daily of animal-based protein or the equivalent in plant-based protein.

Healthy oils and fats include olive oil, canola oil, nut oils, nuts, olives and avocados. These are considered healthier than butter, other forms of dairy fat and fats from meat because they are lower in saturated fat. Still, all pure fats have the same number of calories so they should be consumed in moderation.

The benefits and drawbacks of alcohol continue to be debated. The guidelines state that if alcohol is consumed, it should be consumed only in moderation, defined as up to one drink per day for women and two for men. One drink equals a 12-ounce beer, 5-ounce glass of wine or 1.5-ounce shot of 80 proof distilled spirits.

Putting Guidelines Into Action

The U.S. Department of Agriculture created a website, ChooseMyPlate.gov, to help people plan healthy, balanced meals that coincide with their food likes and dislikes, as well as their lifestyle, culture and traditions. The site depicts a plate divided into sections for each major type of food with vegetables and fruits filling half the plate and grains and protein each filling a quarter of the plate. A nutritious meal also includes a serving of dairy along with healthy fats. The day's meals should provide the right amount of calories based on age, sex, height, weight and physical activity level. The site also offers instructions for managing sugar and saturated fat by using Nutrition Facts labels and ingredient lists to find amounts of saturated fat, sodium and added sugars and then look for foods and beverages lower in those items.

Good nutrition may seem overwhelming, which is why small changes are so important. ChooseMyPlate.gov encourages small changes such as making over one meal at a time, learning how to make healthful choices at a buffet, ordering healthier takeout foods and beverages, planning meals when going to a potluck or party, and choosing wisely when eating restaurant foods.

Because individuals with autoimmune diseases have multiple symptoms and are on various medications and treatment protocols, food tolerance may be a very real challenge. It is important to track reactions to meals and snacks by keeping a diary of foods and beverages consumed and any discomfort after eating or drinking. Make diet changes slowly and one by one to identify which specific food or drink might be causing problems, and increase healthful foods such as vegetables, legumes and whole grains gradually to allow the digestive system to adapt. 🍴

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Resources

- *Dietary Guidelines for Americans:*
www.hhs.gov/fitness/eat-healthy/dietary-guidelines-for-americans/index.html
- *Choose My Plate:*
www.choosemyplate.gov