

Healthy Nutrition

Eating a healthy diet is one of the most important things you can do for your body. A balanced diet can help you maintain a healthy weight, avoid disease, and feel more energetic. The following information will help you understand the basics of a healthy diet. It will also give you some ways to make better nutrition a part of your everyday life.

Healthy eating basics

Healthy eating involves both choosing healthy foods and eating them in amounts that are right for you. Even if you eat a balanced diet, you may develop a weight problem if you eat too much—that is, if the foods you eat contain more calories than your body needs. Here are two ways to avoid overdoing it:

Familiarize yourself with how many calories you need each day. The number you need depends on factors such as age, gender, height, activity level, and overall health. Find out more at [Canada's Food Guide](#) web page.

Fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables. Fresh fruits and vegetables generally have fewer calories per ounce than other foods. Eating more of them can help you limit calories without counting calories rigidly.

One easy way to do this is to fill half of your plate at each meal with fruits and vegetables and the other half with grains, preferably whole grains, and lean protein. Visit [Half Your Plate](#) to see how your plate might look and to learn about foods in each category.

Guidelines for healthy eating all through life

Here are some guidelines about what to eat:

Avoid saturated fats and trans fats. Everyone needs to eat some fats. Fats help your body absorb necessary vitamins and nutrients. But it's important to choose fats sensibly. Saturated fats can cause a build-up of blood cholesterol, which can lead to heart disease, and should be eaten sparingly.

Saturated fats are typically solid at room temperature and found in many high-fat dairy products, like cheese, whole milk, cream, butter, and ice cream. Saturated fat is also found in fatty meats, the skin and fat of poultry, lard, and some oils, including palm, palm kernel, and coconut.

Partially hydrogenated oil contains trans fats; it is called "partially hydrogenated" due to its chemical make-up. Common sources of trans fats are shortening; margarine; and commercially prepared baked goods, snack foods, and fried foods.

[Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide](#) recommends 30 mL to 45 mL (2 tbsp to 3 tbsp) of unsaturated fats a day to get the fat you need, but keep your consumption of trans fats as low as you can.

Choose foods that are low in cholesterol. Foods that are high in cholesterol, such as egg yolks, high-fat dairy products, and organ meats can also cause high blood cholesterol levels.

According to the Dietitians of Canada, if you do not have heart disease, you should eat less than 300 milligrams (mg) of dietary cholesterol per day.

If you have heart disease or are at risk for heart disease, you should aim for less than 200 mg of dietary cholesterol per day.

Eat unsaturated fats. Foods with unsaturated fats do not raise blood cholesterol. These include:

- vegetable, olive, sunflower, canola, and peanut oils
- nuts
- avocados
- fatty fish, like salmon

Choose beverages and foods that are low in sugar. Sugars occur naturally in many foods, and your body can break down and use these types of sugars for energy. Sugar (in a variety of forms) is also added to many foods and beverages. This added sugar provides little, if any, nutritional value and can cause weight gain and tooth decay.

These foods have added sugar and should be consumed in moderation:

- soda
- candy
- cookies, cakes, and pies
- fruit drinks, like fruit punch or lemonade
- dairy desserts, like ice cream and sweetened yogurts

Eat foods that are low in salt. You can reduce your chance of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease by reducing the amount of salt you eat.

Salt is mainly found in processed and prepared foods, so try to eat fresh foods, or look for products marked "low sodium" or "sodium-free."

Canadians consume approximately 3,400 mg of sodium daily—roughly double what we need.

Health Canada recommends no more than 2,300 mg of sodium a day for healthy adults, but the ideal sodium intake is between 1,000 and 1,500 mg daily and guidelines vary depending on age and health condition.

Visit [Health Canada's website](#) and search for "Sodium in Canada" to access a table. Remember that your taste for salt is not fixed. Though you might miss the saltier tastes at first, your taste for salt will decrease after a period of time.

Limit your intake of alcohol. Alcoholic beverages supply calories but few nutrients. Alcohol also alters judgment and can lead to alcohol dependency and other health problems. Experts recommend drinking alcohol in moderation, defined as up to one drink per day for women and up to two drinks per day for men.

Get most of your calories from whole grains, fruits and vegetables, low-fat or non-fat dairy products, and lean meats or meat substitutes.

Before you use these guidelines for yourself or members of your family, consult with your physician. Your age, activity level, health, and other factors will determine how many servings you should have from each food group.

More tips for healthy nutrition

Watch your portion sizes. Many restaurant meals—and even meals you cook at home—may be up to three or four times the size of an average portion.

Get to know what a serving size *really* is and limit yourself to that amount of food. Many things sold in an individual package—a can of soda or a 12-ounce steak—actually provide two or more servings.

When you're eating at a restaurant, consider ordering a half portion, sharing your meal, or asking to have some of it wrapped up to take home.

Eat more whole-grain foods. Whole grains (oatmeal, whole wheat, brown rice, whole oats, whole rye) have more vitamins, minerals, fibre, and other nutrients than refined grains, like those found in white rice or pasta.

Drink water instead of soda or juice. Water has zero calories and doesn't contain sugar, both of which are in soda and juice.

Aim for a variety of fruits and vegetables every day. Eat raw vegetables or fruits, like carrots or an apple, for a snack or eat fruit for dessert.

Eat breakfast. Eating breakfast can help you control hunger throughout the day. Try oatmeal and a piece of fruit or some yogurt with berries.

Switch to low-fat versions of some foods. Use low-fat cheese, sour cream, cottage cheese, yogurt, and zero-trans-fat margarine instead of the high-fat versions. Try low-fat ice cream or frozen yogurt for dessert.

Reduce the amount of salad dressing, mayonnaise, butter, and other high-fat condiments you use. Try the low-fat versions of these foods or substitute other things, such as fresh lemon juice or vinegar and spices on a salad, mustard on a sandwich, or salsa on a baked potato.

Choose the leanest cuts of meat you can find. Buy lean ground beef, skinless chicken, and other lower-fat cuts. Trim all visible fat from meats.

Avoid fried foods. Fried foods are high in saturated and trans fats. Substitute a baked potato for French fries; get broiled or grilled fish or chicken instead of fried.

Eat healthy snacks. Instead of chips or candy, snack on fruit, pretzels, whole-grain crackers, or vegetables.

Be careful with low-fat or reduced-fat foods. Just because something is labelled "low fat" doesn't mean it doesn't have any calories. Check portion sizes and eat everything in moderation.

Eating a healthy diet doesn't mean sacrificing your favourite foods or severely limiting the amount of food you eat. Instead, building a healthy diet is about choosing the best foods for your body—foods with the nutrients your body needs to be at its best.

Resources

[Canada's Food Guide - Health Canada](#)

[Dietitians of Canada](#)

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