



# A BALANCED DIET

Why is it so important?

## WHAT IS A BALANCED DIET?

A balanced diet gives your body all the nutrients it needs to function correctly.

**A balanced diet** is a diet that contains a variety of foods in certain quantities and proportions so that the requirement for calories, proteins, minerals, vitamins, and alternative nutrients is adequate, noting a small provision of nutrients is held in reserve for those occasions when we go hungry!

**A healthy diet** is a diet that helps maintain or improve your overall health. A healthy diet provides the body with essential nutrition, fluid, macronutrients, micronutrients, and adequate food energy.

To get the nutrition you need, most of your daily calories should come from:

- Fresh fruits
- Fresh vegetables
- Whole grains
- Legumes
- Nuts
- Lean proteins
- Healthy fats

## ABOUT CALORIES

The number of calories in a food refers to the amount of energy stored in that food. Your body uses calories from food for walking, thinking, breathing, and all body functions.

The average person needs about 2,000 calories every day to maintain their weight, but the amount will depend on their age, sex, and physical activity level. Males tend to need more calories than females, and people who exercise need more calories than people who don't.

Current guidelines list the following calorie intakes for males and females of different ages:

PERSON	CALORIE REQUIREMENTS
Sedentary children: 2-8 years	1,000-1,400
Active children: 2-8 years	1,000-2,000
Females: 9-13 years	1,400-2,200
Males: 9-13 years	1,600-2,600
Active females: 14-30 years	1,800-2,400
Sedentary females: 14-30 years	1,500-2,000
Active males: 14-30 years	2,800-3,200
Sedentary males: 14-30 years	2,000-2,600
Active people: 30 years and over	2,000-3,000
Sedentary people: 30 years and over	1,600-2,400

The source of your daily calories is important. Foods that provide mainly calories and very little nutrition are known as "**empty calories**".

Examples of foods that provide empty calories include:

- Cakes, cookies, and donuts
- Processed meats
- Energy and fizzy drinks
- Fruit drinks with added sugar
- Ice cream
- Chips and fries
- Pizza



However, it's not only the type of food but the ingredients that make it nutritious.

A homemade pizza with a wholemeal base and plenty of fresh veggies on top may be a healthy choice but in contrast, premade pizzas and other highly processed foods, often contain empty calories.

To maintain good health, limit your consumption of empty calories and instead try to get your calories from foods that are rich in other nutrients.

## **WHY IS A BALANCED DIET IS IMPORTANT?**

A balanced diet supplies the nutrients your body needs to work effectively. Without balanced nutrition, your body is more prone to disease, infection, fatigue, and low performance.

Children who don't get enough healthy foods may face growth and developmental problems, poor academic performance, and frequent infections. They can also develop unhealthy eating habits that may persist into adulthood.

Without exercise, children also have a higher risk of obesity and various diseases that make up metabolic syndrome, such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.

## **BENEFITS OF A HEALTHY / BALANCED DIET**

### **MANAGE A HEALTHY WEIGHT**

The critical issues for weight loss are the diet you eat and exercise you take. Generally, it is believed to be 75% diet and 25% exercise.

A meta-analysis of 700 weight loss studies found that people experience the biggest results when they eat well. On average, dieting without exercise amounts to 23 pounds lost over 15 weeks. On the other hand, exercising without dieting results in six pounds lost after 21 weeks. Of course, this doesn't discount the value and health benefits of exercise both mentally and physically!

You need to deal with to be as healthy as possible.

### **SUPPORT A STRONG IMMUNE SYSTEM**

You rely on your immunity to defend against bacteria, viruses, fungi, and other foreign invaders. However, poor nutrition starves your immune system of the proper vitamins and minerals it needs to produce antibodies. If you focus on eating well, you are less likely to become sick.

### **INCREASED ENERGY LEVEL**

The whole purpose of eating is to get energy from your food. "Empty calories" found in fizzy drinks, processed snacks, and other junk food may fill your stomach, but they fail to provide high-quality energy.

For that, you need complex carbohydrates, healthy fats, and protein. Also, if you have unexplained fatigue, try increasing your iron intake with seafood, poultry, dark leafy greens, and peas. Your body also absorbs iron better if you eat it with vitamin C, which is found in foods like broccoli, peppers, oranges, and tomatoes.

### **SAVE ON MEDICAL EXPENSES**

It's expensive to be unhealthy! With nearly two out of three UK adults weighing in above average, far too many people have coronary heart disease, strokes, cancer, and diabetes. It's estimated that if more people ate a balanced diet to avoid these preventable diseases, it could save billions a year in medical costs and spare countless lives.



## REDUCE THE RISK OF CHRONIC ILLNESS

A large portion of the NHS goes toward treating diet-related chronic illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes. While genetics play a role in how likely you are to contract type 2, even the most at-risk individual is unlikely to get the disease if they eat a balanced diet. If diabetes runs in your family, it's more important than ever to watch your sugar intake so you don't put yourself at greater risk.

## SLOW THE EFFECTS OF AGING

Food's high in antioxidants—including berries, kale, spinach, red cabbage, nuts, beans, and dark chocolate—have anti-aging properties that help your body function better as you age. You may be less prone to wrinkles, heart disease, and even cancer if you include antioxidants in your balanced diet.

## HELP YOU LIVE LONGER

Although not an official cause of death, being overweight is a leading precursor of premature death in the UK. If you want to live a long life with fewer health complications, focus on eating better.

## IMPROVE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Your body isn't the only thing that benefits when you eat a balanced diet; your mental health also improves! You may routinely reach for junk food

when you're feeling down, but what you really need to boost your spirits is a diet full of vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids, and complex carbohydrates. One study found that eating more fruits, vegetables, legumes, beans, nuts, whole grains, fish, and olive oil reduced symptoms of depression among participants, which lasted for six months after the experiment.

## ENHANCE YOUR MENTAL FOCUS

Healthy food not only improves your mood, but it also sharpens your mental focus. According to research, saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol can damage brain tissue and even lead to strokes. On the other hand, foods high in healthy mono- and polyunsaturated fats—such as olive oil, fish, and nuts—have been linked to lower rates of dementia.

## FOODS TO AVOID

Foods to avoid or limit on a healthy diet include:

- Highly processed foods
- Refined grains
- Added sugar and salt
- Red and processed meat
- Alcohol
- Trans fats

But, what's healthy for one person may not be suitable for another. Whole wheat flour can be a healthy ingredient for many

people but isn't suitable for those with a gluten intolerance, for example.

## WHAT TO EAT FOR A BALANCED DIET?

A healthy, balanced diet will usually include the following nutrients:

- Vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants
- Carbohydrates, including starches and fibre
- Protein
- Healthy fats

A balanced diet will include a variety of foods from the following groups:

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Grains
- Dairy
- Protein foods

Examples of protein foods include meat, eggs, fish, beans, nuts, and legumes.

People who follow a vegan diet consume only plant-based foods. They won't eat meat, fish, or dairy, but their diet will include other items that provide similar nutrients.

Tofu and beans, for example, are plant-based sources of protein. Some people are intolerant of dairy but can still build a balanced diet by choosing a variety of nutrient-rich replacements.



# DIFFERENT FOODS

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## FRUITS

Fruits are nutritious, they make a tasty snack or dessert, and they can satisfy a sweet tooth. Local fruits that are in season are fresher and provide more nutrients than imported fruits.

Fruits are high in sugar, but this sugar is natural. Unlike chocolates and many sweet desserts, fruits also provide fibre and other nutrients. This means they're less likely to cause a sugar spike and they'll boost the body's supply of essential vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants.

If you have diabetes, your doctor or dietitian can advise you on which fruits to choose, how much to eat, and when.

## VEGETABLES

Vegetables are a key source of essential vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Eat a variety of vegetables with different colours for a full range of nutrients. Dark, leafy greens are an excellent source of many nutrients. They include:

- Spinach
- Kale
- Green beans
- Broccoli
- Collard greens
- Swiss chard

Local, seasonal vegetables are often reasonable in price and easy to prepare. Use them in the following ways:

- As a side dish
- Roasted in a tray with a splash of olive oil
- As the base in soups, stews, and pasta dishes
- As a salad
- In purées
- In juices and smoothies

## GRAINS

Refined white flour is featured in many breads and baked goods, but it has limited nutritional value. This is because much of the goodness is in the hull of the grain, or outer shell, which manufacturers remove during processing.

Whole grain products include the entire grain, including the hull. They provide additional vitamins, minerals, and fibre. Many people also find that whole grains add flavour and texture to a dish. Try switching from white breads, pastas, and rice to whole grain options.

## DAIRY

Dairy products provide essential nutrients, including:

- Protein
- Calcium
- Vitamin d

They also contain fat. If you're seeking to limit your fat intake, reduced fat options might be best. Your doctor can help you decide.

For those following a vegan diet, many dairy-free milks and other dairy alternatives are now available, made from:

- Flax seed
- Almonds and cashews
- Soy
- Oats
- Coconut

These are often fortified with calcium and other nutrients, making them excellent alternatives to dairy from cows. Some have added sugar, so read the label carefully when choosing.

## PROTEINS

Meats and beans are primary sources of protein, which is essential for wound healing and muscle maintenance and development, among other functions.

## ANIMAL PROTEIN

Healthy animal-based options include:

- Red meats, such as beef and mutton
- Poultry, such as chicken and turkey
- Fish, including salmon, sardines, and other oily fish

Too much processed meats and red meats may increase the risk of cancer and other diseases, according to some research. Some processed meats also contain a lot of added preservatives and salt. Fresh, unprocessed meat is the best option.



## PLANT-BASED PROTEIN

Nuts, beans, and soy products are good sources of protein, fibre, and other nutrients.

Examples include:

- Lentils
- Beans
- Peas
- Almonds
- Sunflower seeds
- Walnuts

Tofu, tempeh, and other soy-based products are excellent sources of protein and are healthy alternatives to meat.

## FATS AND OILS

Fat is essential for energy and cell health, but too much fat can increase calories above what the body needs and may lead to weight gain. In the past, guidelines have recommended avoiding saturated fats, due to concerns that they would raise cholesterol levels.

More recent studies suggest that partially replacing with unsaturated fats lowers cardiovascular disease risk and that some saturated fat should remain in the diet – about 10 percent or less of calories.

Trans fats, however, should still be avoided.

Recommendations on fats can sometimes be hard to follow, but one report has proposed the following guideline:

- Fats to love: vegetable oils and fish oils
- Fats to limit: butter, cheese, and heavy cream
- Fats to lose: trans fats, used in many processed and premade foods, such as donuts
- Most experts consider olive oil to be a healthy fat, and especially extra virgin olive oil, which is the least processed type
- Deep fried foods are often high in calories but low in nutritional value, so you should eat them sparingly.

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A healthy diet will combine all the nutrients and foods groups mentioned above, but you need to balance them, too. A handy way to remember how much of each food group to eat is the plate method. The “Choose My Plate” initiative recommends:

- Filling half your plate with fruits and vegetables
- Filling just over one quarter with grains
- Filling just under one quarter with protein foods
- Adding dairy on the side (or a non-dairy replacement).

Keep in mind this is generic and individual needs will vary. Always consult a nutritionist / GP if you are unsure.

If you have questions about your diet or feel that you need to lose weight or change your eating habits, schedule an appointment with your doctor or a nutritionist.

They can suggest dietary changes that will help you get the nutrition you need while promoting your overall health.

