

## Nutrition: How to Make Healthier Food Choices

A healthy diet has many benefits. It can prevent health conditions like heart disease and cancer, and it can lower your cholesterol. It can give you more energy, help you focus, and improve your mood. It can also help you lose weight or stay at a healthy weight.

### Path to Improved Health

What you eat and drink matters. Everyone has different calorie needs. This is based on our age, sex, activity level, and health conditions. It is important to pick foods and drinks that you like and that are high in nutrients. Your choices should also match your personal preferences, cultural traditions, and budget. If you have trouble getting healthy food for any reason, please talk to your family doctor. You can also search the Neighborhood Navigator (<https://navigator.aafp.org/>). This website can help you find programs in your community that can provide support.

### General Nutrition

Choose foods full of vitamins, minerals, and the right balance of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Eat whole fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, lean proteins, and plant-based oils, which are low in saturated fat. Limit alcohol and

sugary drinks. Avoid foods with saturated fats like sandwiches, pasta, and other grain-based meals. You should also avoid added sugar and salt in foods like frozen meals, pre-packaged snacks, and other processed foods.

### Fruits and Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are rich in fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Try to eat many different colors of fruits and vegetables each day for flavor and variety. Fruits and vegetables should cover half of your plate at each meal. Don't add saturated fats or sugar to vegetables and fruits. This means avoiding margarine, butter, mayonnaise, and sour cream. You can use yogurt, healthy oils (such as canola or olive oil), or herbs

### Fruits and Vegetables

#### Instead of this:

Regular or fried vegetables served with cream, cheese, or butter

Fruits served with cream cheese or sugary sauces

Fried potatoes, including french fries, hash browns, and potato chips

#### Try this:

Raw, steamed, boiled, sautéed, or baked vegetables tossed with olive oil, salt, and pepper, or with onions, garlic, or spices (like cumin)

Fresh fruit with peanut, almond, or cashew butter or plain yogurt

Baked sweet potatoes or switch with vegetables instead

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instead. Potatoes and corn are not considered vegetables. Your body processes them more like grains.

### Grains

Choose products that list whole grains as the first ingredient. Whole grains are high in fiber, protein, and vitamins. They are digested slowly, helping you feel full longer and keeping you from overeating. Avoid products that are labeled “enriched.”

Hot cereals like oatmeal are usually low in saturated fat. However, instant cereals with cream may contain processed oils and can be high in sugar. Granola

cereals usually contain a lot of sugar. Most cold cereals are made with refined grains and are high in sugar. Look for whole grain, low-sugar options instead.

Try not to eat rich sweets, such as doughnuts, rolls, and muffins. Have fruit or a piece of dark chocolate instead to satisfy your sweet tooth.

### Protein

Protein can come from animal and vegetable sources. People who get more of their protein from animal sources tend to have more health problems that can lead to illness and early death.

It is healthier to get most of your daily protein from plants and lean animal sources. Red meats (such as beef, pork, veal, and lamb) are higher in fat. If you eat these, choose leaner cuts.

#### Grains

Instead of this:	Try this:
Croissants, rolls, biscuits, and white bread	Whole grain breads, including wheat, rye, and pumpernickel
Doughnuts, pastries, and scones	Whole grain English muffins and small whole grain bagels
Fried tortillas	Soft tortillas (corn or whole wheat) that do not contain trans fats
Sugary cereals and regular granola	Whole grain cereal, oatmeal, and reduced-sugar granola
Snack crackers	Whole grain crackers
Potato or corn chips and buttered popcorn	Unbuttered popcorn
White pasta	Whole wheat pasta
White rice	Brown or wild rice
Fried rice or pasta mixes	Brown rice or whole grain pasta with low-sodium vegetable sauce
All-purpose white flour	Whole wheat flour

#### Protein

Instead of this:	Try this:
Prime and marbled cuts of meat	Select-grade lean beef, such as round, sirloin, and loin cuts
Pork spare ribs and bacon	Lean pork, such as tenderloin and loin chop, turkey bacon, or tofu bacon
Regular ground beef	Lean or extra-lean ground beef, ground chicken or turkey, tempeh, or beans
Lunch meats like pepperoni, salami, bologna, and liverwurst	Lean lunch meats like turkey, chicken, and ham
Regular hot dogs and sausage	Fat-free hot dogs, turkey dogs, or tofu hot dogs
Breaded fish sticks and cakes, fish canned in oil, or seafood prepared with butter or served with high-fat sauce	Fish (fresh, frozen, or canned in water), grilled fish sticks and cakes, or shellfish

## Nutrition: How to Make Healthier Food Choices *(continued)*

### Vegetable Protein Sources

You can get a lot of protein from plant sources (like tofu, lentils, peas, and beans), especially when you eat them with foods from other groups that also have some protein (like seeds, nuts, and whole grains). You can also swap beans or other plant-based proteins for meat in recipes like lasagna or chili.

### Beef, Pork, Veal, and Lamb

Lean beef and veal cuts have the words “loin” or “round” in their names. Lean pork cuts have the words “loin” or “chop” in their names. When you do eat these proteins, choose cuts such as sirloin, tenderloin, top round, and eye of round. Trim off the outside fat before cooking the meat. Trim any inside fat before eating it. Use herbs, spices, and low-salt marinades to season meat.

Baking, broiling, grilling, and roasting are the healthiest ways to cook meats.

Lean cuts can be panbroiled or stir-fried. Use a nonstick pan, canola oil, or olive oil instead of butter or margarine. Don't serve meat with high-fat sauces or gravy.

### Poultry

Chicken and turkey breasts are a good choice because they are low in fat and high in protein. Only eat duck and goose once in a while, because they are higher in saturated fat. Remove skin and visible fat before cooking. Baking, broiling, grilling, and roasting are the healthiest ways to cook poultry. Skinless poultry can be panbroiled or stir-fried. Use a

nonstick pan, canola oil, or olive oil instead of butter or margarine.

### Seafood

Most seafood is high in healthy polyunsaturated fats. Healthy omega-3 fatty acids are also found in some fish, such as salmon and cold-water trout. If good-quality fresh fish isn't available, buy frozen fish. To prepare fish, you should poach, steam, bake, broil, or grill it.

### Dairy

Choose low-fat, skim, or nondairy milk, such as oat, soy, rice, almond, or cashew milk. Try low-fat or part-skim cheeses and dairy products, or choose smaller portions of foods that are high in saturated fat.

Yogurt can replace sour cream in many recipes. It is important to pick yogurt without added sugar.

### Dairy

Instead of this:	Try this:
Whole milk	Skim (nonfat), 1% or 2% (low fat), or nondairy milk, such as oat, soy, rice, almond, or cashew milk
Cream or evaporated milk	Evaporated skim milk
Regular buttermilk	Low-fat buttermilk
Yogurt made with whole milk	Low-fat or nonfat yogurt
Regular cheese, including American, blue, Brie, cheddar, Colby, and Parmesan	Low-fat cheese with less than 3 g of fat per serving, or nondairy soy cheese
Regular cottage cheese	Low-fat cottage cheese (less than 2% fat)
Regular cream cheese	Low-fat cream cheese with less than 3 g of fat per 1-oz serving, or skim ricotta
Ice cream	Sorbet, sherbet, or frozen yogurt with less than 3 g of fat per ½-cup serving

## Nutrition: How to Make Healthier Food Choices *(continued)*

### Fats and Oils

Instead of this:	Try this:
Cookies	Fruit or whole grain cookies (such as cookies made with oatmeal or whole-wheat flour rather than with refined, bleached white flour)
Shortening, butter, and margarine	Olive, canola, and soybean oils
Regular mayonnaise	Yogurt
Regular salad dressing	Vinaigrette made with olive oil and vinegar
Butter or fat to grease pans	Nonstick cooking spray, olive oil, or canola oil

Try mixing yogurt with fruit for dessert. Sorbet and frozen yogurt are lower in fat than ice cream.

### Fats and Oils

Don't be afraid to eat fats and oils. We need unsaturated and saturated fats, but most Americans get too much saturated fat. Try to limit saturated and trans fats. Heart disease, diabetes, some cancers, and arthritis have been linked to diets high in saturated fat, particularly saturated fats from animal products.

### Drinks

It is important to stay hydrated. However, sugary drinks are not healthy. These include fruit juices, soda, sports and energy drinks, sweetened or flavored milk, and sweet tea. Artificial sweeteners may also be bad for your health. Drink mostly water or other unsweetened drinks. Avoiding alcohol completely is best for your health. But, if you do drink alcohol, women should have no more than one drink per day, and men should have no more than two drinks per day. One standard drink is 12 oz of beer, 5 oz of wine, or 1.5 oz of liquor.

### Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- How many servings should I eat from each food group?
- If I'm on a strict diet, like vegetarian or vegan, how can I make healthy food choices?

### More Information

U.S. Department of Agriculture, My Plate  
<https://www.myplate.gov/>

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