

# PATIENT EDUCATION



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE PHYSICIANS

## Healthy Eating

**E**ating well is one of the best things you can do to stay healthy. Making good food choices can give you more energy, improve your physical health and mental well-being, and decrease your risk of disease.

This pamphlet explains

- the benefits of healthy eating
- good food choices
- balancing your diet
- a healthy weight for you

### Benefits of Healthy Eating

A well-balanced diet is crucial to good health. Your body needs a balanced supply of **nutrients** to grow, replace worn-out tissue, and provide energy. Not getting enough of these important nutrients can affect your health. However, eating too much food and excess **calories** can lead to health problems. **Obesity** has become a major health concern in the United States. Obesity increases the risk of **cardiovascular disease**, **diabetes**, high blood pressure, and certain types of cancer, including breast cancer, colon cancer, and cancer of the **uterus**. Obesity also is associated with infertility. By maintaining a healthy lifestyle that combines good food choices and exercise, many of these conditions can be prevented or controlled.

### Food Choices

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's web site "MyPlate" ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)) can help you plan a healthy diet. It offers a free diet-tracking program called "SuperTracker" that takes into account your age, sex, height, weight, and physical activity

and gives the amount of food you should have each day from each of the following five food groups:

1. Grains—Foods made with grains such as wheat, rice, oats, or barley are all grain foods. Grain foods include bread, pasta, oatmeal, cereal, and tortillas. Make one half of the grain foods that you eat each day whole grains. Whole grains are those that have not been processed and include the whole grain kernel. Whole grains include steel-cut oatmeal, brown rice, and barley.
2. Fruits—Fruits can be fresh, canned, frozen, or dried. Juice that is 100% fruit juice also counts, but fresh, whole fruit is best.
3. Vegetables—Vegetables can be raw or cooked, frozen, canned, dried, or 100% vegetable juice. Eat a variety of different-colored vegetables—orange, red, green, and yellow.
4. Protein foods—Protein foods include meat, poultry, seafood, beans and peas, eggs, processed soy products, nuts, and seeds. Include a variety of proteins in your diet and choose lean or low-fat meat and poultry.

5. Dairy foods—Milk and products made from milk, such as cheese, yogurt, and ice cream, make up the dairy group. Choose fat-free or low-fat (1%) varieties.

Some people have food allergies, cannot digest certain foods, or are unable to tolerate certain foods because of an **autoimmune disorder**. For example, some people cannot ingest milk or milk products because their bodies do not make an enzyme called lactase that digests milk. People with celiac disease have an immune reaction to gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley. For more information on food intolerances and for tips on how to replace these items in your meal planning, go to [www.nutrition.gov/nutrition-and-health-issues/digestive-disorders](http://www.nutrition.gov/nutrition-and-health-issues/digestive-disorders). It often is helpful to see a dietitian if you have special nutrition needs.

### Balancing Your Diet

Every diet should include proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. In recent years, a lot of attention has been paid to special diets that emphasize one nutrient over another. The truth is, there is no magic formula for a healthy diet. The key is to try to balance your diet by eating a variety of healthy foods.

#### Protein

Protein provides the nutrients your body needs to grow and repair muscles and other tissues. Protein is found in the following foods:

- Beef, pork, and fish
- Poultry
- Eggs
- Beans and peas
- Nuts and seeds

Make sure that you eat a variety of protein foods. Choose meats and poultry that are lower in fat, such as chicken and lean cuts of beef. Fish and shellfish are good sources of protein and contain healthy fats. However, women who are pregnant or who are planning to become pregnant, as well as young children, should avoid certain types of fish that are high in mercury—shark, tilefish, king mackerel, and swordfish. Albacore tuna (which has higher mercury levels than canned light tuna) should be eaten no more than once a week.

For vegetarians, protein can be found in nuts, seeds, nut butters, and soy products such as tempeh and tofu. Vegetarians who include dairy products in their diets also can get needed protein from milk and eggs.

#### Fats

The body needs a certain amount of fat to function normally. Some types of fats, called omega-3 fatty acids, play an important role in brain development. Fats also are essential to the function of the **immune**

**system**, aid in blood clotting, and help your body use vitamins A, D, E, and K.

The fat in the foods you eat is digested and sent to the liver. The liver then assembles the fat into **lipoproteins**. Lipoproteins are made of **cholesterol**, fats, and protein. Lipoproteins carry fat through your blood vessels for use by or storage in other parts of the body.

There are different types of fat found in foods. Some have health benefits, while others do not. You should be aware of the different types of fat in your diet:

- Saturated fats come mainly from meat and dairy products. They tend to be solid when chilled. Examples include butter and lard. There also are two plant-based saturated fats—palm oil and coconut oil.
- Unsaturated fats tend to be liquid and come mostly from plants and vegetables. Olive, canola, peanut, sunflower, and fish oils are all unsaturated fats.
- Trans fats are unsaturated fats that have been chemically processed to be solid at room temperature. This is done to make foods last longer and give them better flavor. Vegetable shortenings, margarines, crackers, cookies, and snack foods like potato chips often contain trans fats.

Too much saturated fat and trans fat in your diet can increase your cholesterol level, which can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease. Most of the fat that you eat should be in the form of unsaturated plant oils.

Keep in mind that all types of fat are high in calories. Ounce for ounce, fat has more than double the calories as the same amount of protein or carbohydrates. Fat that your body does not need right away is stored as fat tissue. Fat is converted into energy when your body uses up more calories than you eat. If you do not use up these calories, the fat stores accumulate. Excess body fat can lead to several health problems, including diabetes, heart disease, and joint problems.

The amount of fat you should eat is based on your age, sex, and level of physical activity. Fats should make up no more than 20–35% of an adult's diet. For most people, that is about 44–78 grams of fat daily. If you exercise more than 30 minutes a day, you may be able to consume more than this amount.

Most people in the United States get more than the recommended amount of fat per day. To help reduce your overall fat intake, limit your intake of foods that are high in saturated fat, such as full-fat dairy products and meats. Drink low-fat milk and eat low-fat meats, such as poultry. You also can decrease your fat intake by changing the way you prepare foods:

- Broil, bake, poach, or steam your food instead of frying or sauteing it.
- Skim liquid fat from soups.
- Trim all fat from meats.
- Remove skin from poultry.

Limit your intake of processed low-fat foods. Often, low-fat cookies and chips are high in sugar and salt to make them taste good. Read food labels carefully.

## Carbohydrates

All carbohydrates are broken down into *glucose*, the body's main fuel that powers all of its activities. There are two types of carbohydrates: simple carbohydrates and complex carbohydrates. Simple carbohydrates provide a quick energy boost because they are digested and absorbed rapidly. They are found in naturally sweet foods like fruits and also can be added to foods in the form of table sugar, honey, and syrup. Simple carbohydrates often are high in calories. It is best to limit your intake of simple carbohydrates to those

### Reading Food Labels

All packaged foods must be labeled clearly with nutrition information. Reading all food labels can help you make smart food choices. The labels will tell you how many grams of fat and how many calories are in each serving.

**Serving Size:** The amount served and eaten. The numbers on the label refer to this amount of food.

**Calories:** Amount of energy the food supplies in one serving.

**Nutrients:** A list of the nutrients the product contains. Nutrients often listed here are fat (saturated and trans), cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrate (dietary fiber and sugars), and protein.

**Total Fat:** The amount of fat in one serving.

**Saturated Fat:** This type of fat comes mainly from meat and milk products. It tends to be solid when chilled, such as butter and lard. Shortening, palm oil, and coconut oil also are saturated fats.

**Trans Fat:** Trans fat is made when liquid oil is turned into solid fat like shortening and hard margarine. This is done to make foods last longer and give them better flavor. Vegetable shortenings, some margarines, crackers, cookies, and snack foods like potato chips contain trans fat.

**Percent Daily Values:** The percentage of nutrients this product provides based on the recommended amount you should have daily. It is based on a diet of 2,000 calories.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size: 1 package (28g)	
Servings Per Container: 1	
Amount Per Serving	
<b>Calories</b> 100	Calories from Fat 10
% Daily Value*	
<b>Total Fat</b> 1g	2%
<b>Saturated Fat</b> .5g	2%
<i>Trans Fat</i> 0g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 0g	0%
<b>Sodium</b> 450mg	19%
<b>Total Carbohydrate</b> 22g	7%
Dietary Fiber 2g	
Sugars 0g	
<b>Protein</b> 3g	
Vitamin A 0%	Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 0%	Iron 3%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:	
	Calorie 2,000 2,500
Total Fat	Less than 65g 80g
Sat. Fat	Less than 20g 25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg 300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg 2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g 375g
Dietary Fiber	25g 30g
Calories per gram:	
Fat 9	Carbohydrate 4 Protein 4

found naturally in food. Stay away from sugary drinks and foods with added sugar.

Complex carbohydrates include dietary fiber and starches. It takes your body longer to process them, so complex carbohydrates provide longer-lasting energy than simple carbohydrates. Complex carbohydrates are found in bread, rice, pasta, some fruits, and starchy vegetables such as potatoes and corn.

Fiber is found in plant foods. It is the part of the plant that your body cannot digest. Fiber passes relatively unchanged through your digestive system. It can help prevent constipation by adding bulk to the stool, making it easier to pass. You should eat about 25 grams of fiber daily. The following foods are good sources of fiber:

- Fruits (especially dried fruits, berries, oranges, and apples and peaches with the skin)
- Vegetables (such as dried beans and peas and leafy vegetables like spinach and kale)
- Whole-grain products (such as whole-wheat bread or brown rice)

Fiber also helps maintain a stable blood glucose level because it passes slowly through the digestive tract. Foods that do this are described as "low-glycemic" because they do not cause the blood glucose level to spike. Eating low-glycemic foods can help you feel full and reduce the feeling of hunger, which can aid in weight loss. Low-glycemic foods also may help reduce cholesterol levels and prevent diabetes.

## Vitamins and Minerals

Most women need to be sure they get enough calcium, iron, and folic acid and not too much sodium. Some women may need more or less of these vitamins and minerals, such as women who are pregnant or in *menopause*, or who have certain health problems, such as diabetes or high blood pressure.

### Calcium and Vitamin D

Bone is living, growing tissue made up of calcium-phosphate and a protein called collagen. Calcium is needed for healthy bones. Women aged 18–50 years need 1,000 milligrams (mg) of calcium per day. Women older than 50 years need 1,200 mg of calcium per day. Three cups of skim milk daily provide about 1,000 mg of calcium. Other dairy foods, such as yogurt and cheese, also are high in calcium. Non-dairy sources of calcium include the following:

- Dark greens (collards, spinach, turnip greens, kale, and broccoli)
- Soybeans and some soy products
- Certain canned fish and seafood (sardines, pink salmon with bone, blue crab, and clams)
- Cereals and juices with added calcium

It also is important to get enough vitamin D, which helps the body absorb calcium. You need 600 international units of vitamin D a day if you are

aged 19–70 years and 800 international units if you are older than 70 years. Good sources are milk fortified with vitamin D and fish that have a lot of unsaturated fat, such as salmon. Exposure to sunlight also converts a chemical in the skin to vitamin D.

### Iron

Iron is needed to make new red blood cells. The most common form of **anemia** is caused by a lack of iron. Women may become anemic because of loss of blood during menstruation or childbirth. Anemia may make you feel tired and weak.

Most women of childbearing age need 18 mg of iron per day. During and after menopause, women may not need such high levels of iron. If you are aged 51 years or older, you need only 8 mg of iron per day. One serving of most breakfast cereals with added iron should provide enough of this daily requirement. Other foods that are good sources of iron include the following:

- Spinach
- Beans (soybeans, white beans, lentils, kidney beans, chick peas)
- Clams and oysters
- Meats (beef, duck, lamb)
- Organ meats (liver, giblets)

It helps to eat foods rich in vitamin C, like oranges and tomatoes, at the same meal with an iron-rich food. Vitamin C helps your body use iron better.

### Folic Acid

Folic acid is a B vitamin that also is known as folate. Folic acid improves your overall health and also helps reduce the risk of having a baby with a **neural tube defect**. Before pregnancy, you need 400 micrograms of folic acid daily, and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy you need 600 micrograms of folic acid daily. Folic acid is added to certain foods (breads, cereal, pasta, rice, and flour) and is found in leafy dark-green vegetables, citrus fruits, and beans. It may be hard to get all of the folic acid you need from food sources alone. For this reason, it is recommended that all women of childbearing age take a daily supplement containing 400 micrograms of folic acid.

### Sodium

Sodium is linked to high blood pressure. Sodium should be used in small amounts—about 2,300 mg, or about one teaspoon of table salt, a day. If you are older than 50 years, African American, or have diabetes, high blood pressure, or kidney disease, you should have no more than 1,500 mg a day. Choose and prepare foods with little salt. Watch your intake of processed foods, such as soups, salad dressings, and baked goods, which often contain large amounts of sodium. You can check the sodium content of a product by looking on its food label.

### Healthy Weight

Your weight is the result of how many calories you eat versus the number of calories you burn. You should keep your weight at the range that is healthy for your height. The **body mass index (BMI)** is used to compare a person's height with her weight to see if she is overweight. A BMI of 18.5–24.9 is normal. A person with a BMI of 25–29.9 is overweight. A person with a score of 30 or higher is obese. To find out your BMI, go to [www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi](http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi).

If your weight is not in the normal range, try to lose the extra pounds. Even a modest weight loss of 5–10% of your body weight can have a positive effect. The best way to lose weight is to use up more calories than you take in. You can do this by getting regular exercise combined with a program of healthy eating.

### Finally...

Healthy eating is one of the best things you can do to improve your health. To ensure that your diet provides all of the nutrients you need, eat a variety of foods. Balance the food you eat with exercise for weight control. When making food choices, keep the following tips in mind:

- Make one half of your plate fruits and vegetables.
- Switch to skim milk or 1% milk.
- Make one half of your grains whole grains.
- Vary your protein sources. Eat fish twice a week and choose lean meats and poultry. Vegetarians can get protein from a wide variety of plant-based foods such as nuts, seeds, and soy products.
- Choose foods and drinks with little or no added sugars.
- Limit your intake of sodium.
- Eat fewer foods with saturated or trans fats.
- Enjoy your food, but eat less.
- Limit your intake of alcohol (one drink a day for women).

## Glossary

**Anemia:** Abnormally low levels of blood or red blood cells in the bloodstream. Most cases are caused by iron deficiency, or lack of iron.

**Autoimmune Disorder:** A condition in which the body attacks its own tissues.

**Body Mass Index (BMI):** A number calculated from height and weight that is used to determine whether a person is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese.

**Calories:** Units of heat used to express the fuel or energy value of food.

**Cardiovascular Disease:** Disease of the heart and blood vessels.

**Cholesterol:** A natural substance that serves as a building block for cells and hormones and helps to carry fat through the blood vessels for use or storage in other parts of the body.

**Diabetes:** A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

**Glucose:** A sugar that is present in the blood and is the body's main source of fuel.

**Immune System:** The body's natural defense system against foreign substances and invading organisms, such as bacteria that cause disease.

**Lipoproteins:** Substances that transport cholesterol to and from the liver throughout the blood.

**Menopause:** The time in a woman's life when menstruation stops; defined as the absence of menstrual periods for 1 year.

**Neural Tube Defect:** A birth defect that results from incomplete development of the brain, spinal cord, or their coverings.

**Nutrients:** Nourishing substances supplied through food, such as vitamins and minerals.

**Obesity:** A condition characterized by excessive body fat.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) to ensure accuracy.

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