



GORDON C GUNN, MD, FACOG

CONCIERGE PERSONALIZED CARE  
GYNECOLOGY • HORMONE THERAPY  
INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE

## What Is a Healthy Diet? The Importance of Good Nutrition

February 7th, 2022

<https://fullscript.com/blog>

What does healthy eating mean to you? According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a healthy diet “helps to protect against malnutrition in all its forms, as well as non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and cancer.” Our diets are shaped by many factors, including personal beliefs, preferences, lifestyles, socioeconomic status, and health requirements, but are your eating habits conducive to longevity and optimal health? (34) Although researchers have yet to identify a single optimal diet for humans, certain dietary patterns have been shown to promote general health and ensure nutritional adequacy. **Read on to learn more about the importance of good nutrition, healthy eating habits, and the top strategies for improving any diet.**



## What is a healthy diet?

A healthy diet provides adequate energy (calories) and essential nutrients to maintain optimal health. Generally speaking, all diets are composed of three dietary components that provide calories known as *macronutrients*. [Macronutrients](#), which include carbohydrates, fat, and protein, are required by the body in large yet varying amounts. *Micronutrients*, or nutrients needed in small quantities for numerous bodily functions, are also important components of all healthy diets. Examples of micronutrients include vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients (health-promoting plant chemicals). Daily requirements for [macro and micronutrients](#) depend on several factors such as age, sex, and activity level. (9)

Macro and micronutrients play important roles in human health. The references for this infographic can be found in the references section below.

Modern diets are typically calorie-dense but lack adequate micronutrients, contributing to suboptimal nutritional status and poor health outcomes. *Nutrient density*, the amount of micronutrients relative to calories in a food or specific diet, is a term often associated with healthy diets. No matter how or what you eat, finding a balance between energy density and nutrient density can help promote long-term health. How can this be achieved? Start by replacing “empty calories” found in highly processed foods with nutrient-dense whole foods. Whole foods are central components of healthy diets and include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, beans, legumes, and lean [protein](#). (31)

Ultimately, a healthy diet is one that is sustainable for you. Mainstream diet culture encourages fad diets and elimination of large food groups to lose weight or achieve a specific health goal. However, restrictive diets are rarely successful long-term and can have unintended consequences such as disordered eating (e.g., binge eating), weight cycling (yo-yo dieting), and mood disturbances. (5)(14)(25)(29) Finding a dietary pattern that is not only nutrient-dense but realistic, enjoyable, and tailored to your needs, preferences, and circumstances can help you reach your health goals.

## Benefits of good nutrition

Adequate nutrition is necessary for various bodily functions, including cognitive function, [energy](#) production, immune function, and tissue formation. Furthermore, a healthy diet may reduce the risk of certain chronic conditions and promote good general health. Examples of some of the many benefits of a healthy diet include:

- Aiding [digestion](#)
- Facilitating healthy growth and development in children
- Improving [immune health](#)
- Prolonging lifespan
- Promoting healthy pregnancies and [breastfeeding](#)
- Reducing the risk of [heart disease](#), type 2 diabetes, and some cancers
- Strengthening [bones](#) and teeth
- Supporting [healthy skin](#), eyes, and muscles
- Supporting healthy weight (6)

## Different types of diets

Depending on your health goals and dietary preferences, you may choose to follow one of many popular diets. Despite their popularity, many fad diets can be highly restrictive and may thus be lacking several essential nutrients. (19) It's also important to note that what works for one person may not be suitable for another. By working with your integrative healthcare provider, you can establish the appropriate dietary approach for your needs and dietary preferences. Outlined below are some popular diets used for various purposes:

- [Anti-inflammatory](#): A primarily plant-based diet used to address chronic inflammation and associated health conditions such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease (28)
- [Gluten-free](#): A therapeutic diet adopted by individuals with celiac disease or gluten intolerance that excludes all gluten-containing grains such as wheat, barley, and rye
- [Mediterranean](#): A traditional diet common among individuals living in the Mediterranean region that consists of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, olive oil, and whole grains (1)
- [Ketogenic \(keto\)](#): A high-fat, very low-carbohydrate diet used to promote weight loss and address neurological conditions such as pediatric epilepsy (3)(4)
- [Paleolithic \(paleo\)](#): A dietary pattern inspired by the diets of hunter-gatherers of the paleolithic era that consists of lean meats, fish, healthy fats, vegetables, and certain fruits (18)
- [Pescatarian](#): A primarily plant-based diet that eliminates most animal sources of protein except for fish and shellfish
- [Vegan](#): A strictly plant-based diet that restricts all animal-sourced foods and products
- [Vegetarian](#): A dietary pattern that restricts meat, poultry, and fish but allows other animal products such as dairy, eggs, and honey

## 5 Healthy Diet Strategies

Whether you choose to follow a special diet, you've been prescribed a diet by your practitioner, or you simply don't follow any particular diet, there are general guidelines for all healthy eating patterns.

### 1. Balance your meals

Consuming appropriate portions of healthy foods is an important consideration when building your meals. Servings sizes for common foods include:

- Dairy: 1 cup milk or yogurt
- Fruits: 1 cup or one medium whole fruit
- Meat and poultry: 3 oz
- Nuts and seeds: 1 oz
- Vegetables: 1 cup
- Whole grains: ½ cup cooked (2)(22)

Measuring portion sizes for each food can be cumbersome. Instead, consider the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) simplified food guide, **MyPlate**, that depicts a place setting of the five major food groups. You can modify MyPlate to meet your dietary needs. For example, if you follow a vegetarian diet, you can replace meat and seafood with beans, legumes, nuts, seeds, eggs, and dairy products. (32)

## Dietary Guidelines for Americans: **MyPlate**



## 2. Reduce processed foods

Processed foods such as chips, crackers, frozen meals, pastries, and other packaged foods are common mainstays in the [Standard American Diet](#) (SAD), also known as the Western dietary pattern. [\(11\)](#)[\(17\)](#) Processed foods are primary sources of calories, sugar, sodium, and saturated fats for North Americans. Frequent consumption of these foods can contribute to various chronic illnesses such as obesity, [type 2 diabetes](#), and cardiovascular disease. [\(20\)](#)

If a food comes in a package, it's undergone some degree of processing. Scrutinize the nutrition facts label and ingredient list to determine the quality of the food. Is the ingredient list long? Does the food contain ingredients you can't pronounce? Does the food contain added sugar or artificial ingredients? If the answer is "yes" to any of these questions, the food is likely highly processed. The graphic below highlights some important features to look for on a nutrition facts label. (See Next Page: *Reading Nutrition Facts Labels*)

# Reading nutrition facts labels



## Nutrition Facts

8 servings per container  
**Serving Size 2 oz (56g)**

---

Amount per serving  
**Calories 200**

	% Daily Value*
<b>Total Fat 1g</b>	<b>2%</b>
Saturated Fat 0g	<b>0%</b>
Trans Fat 0g	
<b>Cholesterol 0mg</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Sodium 0mg</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Total Carbohydrate 42g</b>	<b>14%</b>
Dietary Fiber 2g	
<b>Total Sugars 2g</b>	
Includes 0g Added Sugars	<b>0%</b>
<b>Protein 7g</b>	
Vitamin D	0%
Calcium	0%
Iron	10%
Potassium	5%

\*The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a healthy diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

**INGREDIENTS:** SEMOLINA (WHEAT), DURUM WHEAT FLOUR, NIACIN, IRON (FERROUS SULFATE), THIAMINE MONONITRATE, RIBOFLAVIN, FOLIC ACID.

**CONTAINS:** WHEAT.

**Serving size:** Indicates the number of servings per container and the individual serving size

**Calories:** Shows the number of calories provided in a single serving

**Amount per serving:** Nutrients with an established daily requirement will show the amount in both weight and % daily value to help you understand how you're achieving your dietary requirements

**Daily Values:** Reflects the percentage of daily nutrient requirement provided in a single serving (5% or less is low, 20% or more is high)

**Total Sugars:** Indicates the amount of both naturally-occurring and added sugar present in a single serving

**Added Sugars:** Indicates the amount of sugar from added sources in a single serving

**Lists the nutrients** that are generally low in current diets to help you consume enough

**Ingredients** are listed in order of predominance.

**Allergens** are listed at the bottom of the label.

Learn how to read nutrition facts labels. Replace the processed foods in your diet with minimally processed, healthier alternatives. For example, rather than reaching for a bag of fruit snacks, grab some fresh fruit, or opt for homemade oatmeal instead of instant oatmeal packets or boxed cereal.

**Healthy tip:** Ultra-processed foods are convenient; however, preparing and pre-portioning healthy foods and storing them in visible spots on your kitchen counter or in the fridge can help make healthy options more accessible. (26)

### 3. Minimize sugar-sweetened beverages

Excess [sugar](#) consumption contributes to excess weight gain, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic conditions. (24) Sugar-sweetened beverages are significant contributors to a higher intake of sugar in Western diets. In fact, according to one study, consumers ingested on average 213 calories per day from sugar-sweetened beverages. (3) Sugar-sweetened beverages such as soft drinks, energy drinks, and sweetened tea and coffee beverages (e.g., flavored lattes, blended coffee drinks, sweet tea) offer no health benefits and are best consumed sparingly. (16)

**Did you know?** Sugar can be disguised under many different names. Download a handout on [sugars](#) to learn more.

### 4. Make more meals at home

Meals from restaurants, particularly fast-food restaurants, are typically laden with sodium, fat, sugar, excess calories, and more. Making meals at home allows you to control the portion sizes and ingredients included in your meals. Research demonstrates that frequent consumption of homemade meals is associated with a greater likelihood of having a healthy body mass index (BMI) and lower adiposity (body fat). Furthermore, individuals consuming five or more home-cooked meals per week consume more fruits and vegetables than those consuming home-cooked meals three times per week. (21)

Rest assured, the occasional takeout meal or restaurant visit won't derail your health goals; however, opting for more homemade meals can promote better nutrition. If you don't feel comfortable in the kitchen, consider cooking with an experienced friend or family member, try delivered meal kits, or sign-up for a local cooking class to gain confidence in the kitchen.

### 5. Eat enough fiber

[Fiber](#) is only found in plant foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, legumes, nuts, and seeds. Adequate fiber consumption is associated with improved digestive health and reduced risk for certain chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and colon cancer. (12)(27)

Considering that many North Americans adhere to a Western dietary pattern rich in processed foods and minimal fruits and vegetables, it's no surprise that a large proportion of the population doesn't consume enough fiber. National consumption surveys demonstrate that approximately 95% of the population doesn't meet daily fiber recommendations. (27) How much fiber is enough? Adult men need about 38 g of fiber per day, whereas women should consume approximately 25 g. (23)

Keep in mind that certain therapeutic diets may necessitate a low-fiber diet. A low-fiber (low-residue) diet may be indicated if you have a particular gastrointestinal condition such as Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, or diverticulitis. (33)



## Food Insecurity: a major barrier to a healthy diet

For many, healthy foods are either physically unavailable or economically infeasible. Food insecurity, defined by the USDA as a “disruption of food intake or eating patterns because of lack of money and other resources,” is a major limiting factor to achieving a healthy diet. (15) Food insecurity, which affects approximately one in eight North Americans, can be influenced by various factors such as income, employment status, race, ethnicity, disability, access to transportation, and proximity to grocery stores. (7)(10) Children and adults who face food insecurity are at increased risk of various negative health outcomes, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, developmental delays, and poor mental health. (15)

Food assistance programs and other local programs:

- Local food banks
- Community gardens and farmers markets
- Community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs
- [Nutrition North Canada program \(NA\)](#), [Emergency Food Security Fund \(AAFC\)](#), and [Indigenous Community Support Fund \(ISC\)](#) in Canada (13)
- National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the United States (8)(15)

## The bottom line

A healthy diet meets your energy requirements while also providing adequate micronutrients. Prioritizing nutrient-dense whole foods over highly processed foods, minimizing sugar, eating enough fiber, and preparing the majority of your meals at home are all effective strategies to improve your diet.