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Dietary guidelines for Americans

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Quick Facts

Dietary Guidelines for Americans:

Eat a variety of foods.

Maintain healthy weight.

Choose a diet low in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol.

Choose a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruits and grain products.

Use sugar only in moderation.

Use salt and sodium only in moderation.

If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation and do not drive.

saturated fat, and increase complex carbohydrates and fiber. Other guidelines suggest only moderate use of sugars and salt, and only moderate use of alcoholic beverages, if used at all.

Food alone cannot make you healthy. Good eating habits based on moderation and variety can help keep you healthy and even improve your health.

Eat a Variety of Foods

You need more than 40 different nutrients for good health. Essential nutrients include vitamins, minerals, amino acids from protein, certain fatty acids from fat, and sources of calories (protein, carbohydrates and fat).

These nutrients should come from a variety of foods, not from a few highly fortified foods or supplements.

What should you eat to stay healthy? These guidelines help answer this question and are intended for healthy Americans two years and older. They are not designed for younger children and infants whose dietary needs differ. This advice is based on current nutrition research.

The first two guidelines form the framework for the diet: "eat a variety of foods" for the nutrients you need and for energy (calories) to "maintain healthy weight." The next two guidelines stress the need for many Americans to change their diets to lower fat, especially

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Any food that supplies calories and nutrients can be part of a nutritious diet. The content of the total diet over a day or more is what counts.

Except for human milk during the first four to six months of life, no single food supplies all the essential nutrients in the amount needed. Milk, for instance, contains little iron and meat provides little calcium. Therefore, it's important to choose from a variety of foods to assure nutritional adequacies.

One way to ensure variety, and with it an enjoyable and nutritious diet, is to select foods each day from five major food groups (Table 1). Each of these food groups is strong in different nutrients. Select different foods from within groups too.

Table 1: Food groups.

Food group	Suggested servings
Vegetables	3-5 servings
Fruits	2-4 servings
Breads, cereals, rice, pasta	6-11 servings
Milk, yogurt, cheese	2-3 servings
Meats, poultry, fish dry beans and peas, eggs, nuts	2-3 servings

There are no known advantages and some potential harm in consuming excessive amounts of any nutrient as supplements.

You rarely need to take vitamin or mineral supplements if you eat a variety of foods. There are a few important exceptions to this general statement.

* **Women in their childbearing years** may need to take iron supplements to replace the iron they lose with menstrual bleeding. Women who no longer menstruate should not take iron supplements routinely.

* **Women who are pregnant or are breast-feeding** need more of many nutrients, especially iron, folic acid, vitamin A, calcium and sources of energy. Detailed advice should come from a physician or registered dietitian.

* **Infants** have special nutritional needs and physicians may prescribe supplements in some cases.

* **Elderly** people who eat little food or are on certain medications may need to take supplements on the advice of their physician or dietitian.

Most of us, however, get all the nutrients we need, if we eat a variety of foods.

Maintain Healthy Weight

If you are too heavy or too thin, your chances of developing health problems are increased. Being overweight is common in the United States. It is linked with high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, the most common type of diabetes, certain cancers, and other types of illness.

Being too thin is a less common problem. It occurs with anorexia nervosa and is linked with osteoporosis in women.

"Healthy" weight depends on how much of your weight is fat, where in your body the fat is located, and whether you have weight-related medical problems, such as high blood pressure, or a family history of such problems.

There is no absolute answer to determine what a healthy weight is for you. Height and weight tables (see Table 2) show desirable ranges for most adults. For most people, their weight should not be much more than when they were 20 or 25 years old.

For adults, body shape as well as weight is important to health. Excess fat in the abdomen may be of greater health risk than that in the hips and thighs.

It is not well understood why some people can eat more than others and still maintain healthy weight. One thing is definite--to lose weight you must take in fewer calories than you burn. This means that you must either choose foods with fewer calories or increase your physical activity, preferably both.

Do not try to lose weight too fast. A steady loss of 1/2 to 1 pound a week until you reach your goal generally is safe. Avoid crash weight-loss diets that severely restrict the variety of foods or the calories you can have. Avoid other extreme approaches, such as induced vomiting and using medications such as laxatives, amphetamines and diuretics. These approaches are not appropriate for weight loss and can be dangerous.

Most weight loss at the beginning of a weight-reduction diet comes from the loss of water. Long-term success depends on new and better habits of eating and

Table 2: Suggested weights for adults

Height ¹	Weight in pounds ²	
	19 to 34 years	35 years and over
5'0"	³ 97-128	108-138
5'1"	101-132	111-143
5'2"	104-137	115-148
5'3"	107-141	119-152
5'4"	111-146	122-157
5'5"	114-150	126-162
5'6"	118-155	130-167
5'7"	121-160	134-172
5'8"	125-164	138-178
5'9"	129-169	142-183
5'10"	132-174	146-188
5'11"	136-179	151-194
6'0"	140-184	155-199
6'1"	144-189	159-205
6'2"	148-195	164-210
6'3"	152-200	168-216
6'4"	156-205	173-222
6'5"	160-211	177-228
6'6"	164-216	182-234

¹Without shoes.

²Without clothes.

³The higher weights in the ranges generally apply to men, who tend to have more muscle and bone; the lower weights generally apply to women, who have less muscle and bone.

Source: Derived from National Research Council, 1989.

exercise. That is why so-called "crash" and "fad" diets usually fail.

A gradual increase of everyday physical activity, like a brisk walk, can help lose weight and keep it off. It also makes you look and feel good.

To help control overeating eat slowly, take smaller portions and avoid "seconds."

Advice for today. Check to see if you are at a healthy weight. If not, set reasonable weight goals and try for long-term success through better habits of eating and exercise. Have children's heights and weights checked regularly by a doctor.

Choose a Diet Low in Fat, Saturated Fat and Cholesterol

Most health authorities recommend that Americans eat less fat, saturated fat and cholesterol.

Populations like ours, with diets high in fat, have more obesity and certain types of cancer. The high levels of saturated fat and cholesterol in our diets are linked to our increased risk for heart disease.

Because fat contains over twice the calories of an equal amount of carbohydrate or protein, a diet low in fat makes it easier to eat a variety of foods without exceeding your calorie needs. A diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol can help maintain a desirable level of blood cholesterol (below 200/mg/dl for adults). As blood cholesterol goes above this level, a greater risk for heart disease occurs. Risk also is increased by high blood pressure, cigarette smoking, diabetes, a family history of premature heart disease, obesity, and being male.

The way diet affects blood cholesterol varies among individuals. However, blood cholesterol does increase in most people when they eat a diet high in saturated fat and cholesterol and excessive in calories. Of these, dietary saturated fat has the greatest effect; dietary cholesterol has less.

Suggested goals for fats in American diets:

Total fat: Thirty percent or less of calories.

Saturated fat: Less than 10 percent of calories.

Cholesterol: Animal products are the source of all dietary cholesterol. Eating less fat from animal sources helps lower cholesterol, total fat and saturated fat in your diet.

These goals for fats are not for children under two years, who have special dietary needs. As children begin to eat with the family (two years or older), encourage them to choose food that is lower in fat and saturated fat and that provides the calories and nutrients they need for normal growth. Older children and adults with established food habits may need to change their diets gradually toward these goals.

Note: These goals for fats apply to the diet over several days, not to a single meal or food. Some foods that contain fat, saturated fat and cholesterol (meats, milk, cheese and eggs) also contain high-quality protein and are our best sources of certain vitamins and minerals. Low-fat choices of these foods are lean meat, low-fat milk and cheeses.

Choose a Diet with Plenty of Vegetables, Fruits and Grain Products

This guideline recommends that adults eat at least three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruits

daily. It recommends at least six servings of grain products (breads, cereals, pasta and rice) with an emphasis on whole grains. Encourage children to eat plenty of these foods.

Vegetables, fruits, and grain products are important parts of the varied diet discussed in the first guideline. They are emphasized in this guideline for their complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber, and other food components linked to good health. They also tend to be low in fat. If you eat the suggested amounts, you are likely to increase carbohydrates and decrease fats in your diet, as health authorities suggest. You also will get more dietary fiber.

Complex carbohydrates (starches) are in breads, cereals, pasta, rice, dry beans and peas, and other vegetables (potatoes and corn). Dietary fiber--a part of plant foods--is in whole-grain breads and cereals, dry beans and peas, vegetables, and fruits. Eat a variety of these fiber-rich foods because they differ in the kinds of fiber they contain.

Foods with fiber are important for proper bowel function and can reduce symptoms of chronic constipation, diverticular disease and hemorrhoids. High fiber diets also may help reduce blood cholesterol levels, the risk of colon cancer and control diabetes.

Just how dietary fiber is involved is not yet clear. Some of the benefit from a higher-fiber diet may be from the food that provides the fiber, not from fiber alone. For this reason, it's best to get fiber from foods rather than from supplements. In addition, excessive use of fiber supplements is associated with greater risk for intestinal problems and lower absorption of some minerals.

Advice for today. Eat more vegetables, including dry beans and peas; fruits; and breads, cereals, pasta and rice. Increase fiber intake by eating more of a variety of foods that contain fiber naturally.

Use Sugars Only in Moderation

Americans eat sugars in many forms (see Table 1). Sugars provide calories and most people like their taste. Some serve as natural preservatives, thickeners and baking aids. This guideline cautions about eating sugars in large amounts and about frequent snacks of foods that contain sugars and starches.

Table 3: Types of sugars?

Table sugar (sucrose)	Honey
brown sugar	syrup
raw sugar	corn sweetener
glucose (dextrose)	high-fructose corn syrup
maltose	molasses
lactose	fruit juice concentrate
sorbitol	mannitol

Sugars and many foods that contain them in large amounts supply calories but are limited in nutrients. Healthy people should use them in moderation. People with low calorie needs should use them sparingly. For active people with high calorie needs, sugars can be an additional source of calories.

Both sugars and starches, which break down into sugars, can contribute to tooth decay. Sugars and starches are in many foods that also supply nutrients: milk, fruits, some vegetables, breads, cereals, and other foods with sugars and starches as ingredients. The more often these foods are eaten, even small amounts, and the longer they are in the mouth before teeth are brushed, the greater the risk for tooth decay. These foods eaten as frequent between-meal snacks may be more harmful to teeth than having them at meals.

Diets high in sugars have not been shown to cause diabetes. The most common type of diabetes occurs in overweight adults. Avoiding sugars, without losing weight, will not solve the problem. Reducing sugar intake and weight loss may help.

Read food labels. A food probably is high in sugars if one of the above appears in the first part of the ingredient list or if the list includes several types of sugar.

Advice for today. Use sugars in moderate amounts, sparingly if your calorie needs are low. Avoid excessive snacking, and brush and floss your teeth regularly.

Use Salt and Sodium Only in Moderation

Table salt contains sodium and chloride, both essential in the diet. However, most Americans eat more salt and sodium than they need. Food and beverages that contain salt provide most of the sodium in our diets and much of it is added during processing and manufacturing.

In populations with diets low in salt, high blood pressure is less common than in populations with diets high in salt. Heredity, obesity, and excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages are other factors that effect blood pressure. Low calcium intake also may be involved.

The major health concern of excessive sodium intake is for people sensitive to sodium and those who have high blood pressure or hypertension. In the United States, about one in three adults has high blood pressure. If these people restrict their salt and sodium, usually their blood pressure will fall.

Persons sensitive to sodium also may reduce their risk of high blood pressure by eating a diet with less salt and other sources of sodium. Since it is difficult to predict who is likely to develop high blood pressure and most people eat far more salt and sodium than they need, it is prudent for all Americans to moderate their salt intake.

If You Drink Alcoholic Beverages, Do So in Moderation

Alcoholic beverages supply calories but little or no nutrients. Drinking them has no direct health benefit, is linked with many health problems, is the cause of many accidents, and can lead to addiction. Their consumption is not recommended.

Some people should not drink alcoholic beverages: women who are pregnant or trying to conceive; individuals who plan to drive or engage in other activities that require attention or skill; individuals who use medicines (including over-the-counter); individuals who cannot keep their drinking moderate; and children and adolescents.

What is moderate drinking?

Women: No more than 1 drink a day

Men: No more than 2 drinks a day

Count as a drink:

* 12 ounces of regular beer

* 5 ounces of wine

* 1-1/2 ounces of distilled spirits (80 proof)

Advice for today. If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation; and don't drive.