

## March is National Nutrition Month

The food and physical activity choices you make every day affect your health - how you feel today, tomorrow, and in the future. You may be eating plenty of food, but not eating the right foods that give your body the nutrients you need to be healthy. You may not be getting enough physical activity to stay fit and burn those extra calories. Eating right and being physically active aren't just a "diet" or a "program" - they are keys to a healthy lifestyle. With healthful habits, you may reduce your risk of many chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, and certain cancers, and increase your chances for a longer life.

The best way to give your body the balanced nutrition it needs is by eating a variety of nutrient-packed foods every day. Just be sure to stay within your daily calorie needs. A healthy eating plan is one that emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products. It also includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts. A healthy eating plan is low in saturated fats, *trans* fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

It's important to make smart food choices and watch portion sizes wherever you are—at the grocery store, at work, in your favorite restaurant, or running errands. Plan ahead when going to the grocery store. Buy a variety of nutrient-rich foods for meals and snacks throughout the week. When grabbing lunch, have a sandwich on whole-grain bread and choose low-fat/fat-free milk, water, or other drinks without added sugars. In a restaurant, opt for steamed, grilled, or broiled dishes instead of those that are fried or sautéed. On a long commute or shopping trip, pack some fresh fruit, cut-up vegetables, string cheese sticks, or a handful of unsalted nuts—to help you avoid impulsive, less healthful snack choices.

There are a right number of calories for you to eat each day. This number depends on your age, activity level, and whether you're trying to gain, maintain, or lose weight. You could use up the entire amount on a few high-calorie items, but chances are you won't get the full range of vitamins and nutrients your body needs to be healthy. Choose the most nutritionally rich foods you can from each food group each day—those packed with vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other nutrients but lower in calories. Pick foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products more often.

Most packaged foods have a Nutrition Facts label. For a healthier you,

- **Check servings and calories.** Look at the serving size and how many servings you are actually consuming. If you double the servings you eat, you double the calories and nutrients, including the % Daily Values (DV).
- **Make your calories count.** Look at the calories on the label and compare them with what nutrients you are also getting to decide whether the food is worth eating. When one serving of a single food item has over 400 calories per serving, it is high in calories.

- **Don't sugarcoat it.** Since sugars contribute calories with few, if any, nutrients, look for foods and beverages low in added sugars. Read the ingredient list and make sure that added sugars are not one of the first few ingredients. Some names for added sugars (caloric sweeteners) include sucrose, glucose, high fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, maple syrup, and fructose.
- **Know your fats.** Look for foods low in saturated fats, *trans* fats, and cholesterol to help reduce the risk of heart disease (5% DV or less is low, 20% DV or more is high). Most of the fats you eat should be polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Keep total fat intake between 20% to 35% of your calories.
- **Reduce sodium (salt), increase potassium.** Research shows that eating less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium (about 1 tsp of salt) per day may reduce the risk of high blood pressure. Most of the sodium people eat comes from processed foods, not from the saltshaker. Also look for foods high in potassium, which counteracts some of sodium's effects on blood pressure.

Becoming healthier isn't just about eating healthy—it's also about physical activity. Regular physical activity is important for your overall health and fitness. It also helps you control body weight by balancing the calories you take in as food with the calories you expend each day. If you eat 100 more food calories a day than you burn, you'll gain about 1 pound in a month. That's about 10 pounds in a year. The bottom line is that to lose weight, it's important to reduce calories and increase physical activity.

These are the basic guidelines for eating a healthy diet. For more information about the food groups and nutrition values, or to pick up some new ideas on physical activity, go to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines> and <http://www.cdc.gov/>.