
Healthy eating for young women

Good nutrition is especially important during this stage of your life when there is so much happening: independent living, career development, travel, establishing relationships, babies and families, and more.

Healthy eating guidelines for young women

The **Australian Dietary Guidelines** are well founded and designed to help you choose foods for a healthy life. Use them as a guide for planning healthy meals and a healthy lifestyle.

Some helpful tips from these guidelines include:

- To achieve and maintain a healthy weight, be physically active and choose amounts of nutritious food and drinks to meet your energy needs.
- Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from the five food groups every day.
- Limit intake of foods containing saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol.
- Care for your food – prepare and **store food safely**.

If you follow a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, **plan your diet** to be sure it includes all the essential nutrients.

Practical tips for selecting healthier foods

1. Compare nutritional quality – check **food labels** to compare the nutritional quality of products.

2. Avoid packaged snack foods – processed snack foods such as chips, biscuits, muffins and cakes are often high in fat, salt, sugar and **kilojoules**. Regular intake of these snacks can contribute to obesity, hypertension (high blood pressure) and heart disease. Better options are:

- fresh or dried fruit
- roasted nuts
- plain crackers with cheese or low-fat dip
- baked pretzels
- low-fat yogurt
- fruit smoothies made with low-fat milk
- mini cans of tuna, baked beans, corn, or four-bean mix.

3. Limit takeaway and convenience foods – most of this food is high in the nutrients you don't want and low in the ones you do. A good rule is to avoid anything fried or covered in breadcrumbs, batter or pastry. Better takeaway options are sushi or rice paper rolls, barbecued chicken (remove the skin) or a good quality burger with salad. Where lower fat, lower salt versions or smaller serves are available, choose them. Find out more about how to **assess the kilojoule count** in your takeaway or convenience food.

4. Watch the beverages – the market is continually being flooded with new beverages and a higher proportion of our total kilojoule intake now comes from drinks. Did you know that:

- Water is the best drink – it contains no kilojoules, it's the best fluid for hydrating the body and it's more or less free.
- Milk is also important as it's a good source of protein and calcium. Choose low-fat varieties if you have weight concerns.
- Most fruit juice contains similar kilojoules to soft drinks, so it's better to eat your fruit rather than drink it. Flavoured milk, smoothies, iced teas and flavoured mineral waters are all high in kilojoules and best avoided, if possible.
- Alcohol, in moderation, can form part of a healthy diet, but drinking too much can be harmful and contribute to weight gain. For more information, see **Alcohol**.

Nutrient-rich foods for young women

Some foods may have components that confer special health benefits in addition to their normal nutrients. These components include:

- **antioxidants** – which help protect against disease. Examples include vitamins C and E, selenium and phytochemicals. They are widely distributed in food, so include a variety of fruits and vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals, nuts and seeds in your diet. Antioxidants may not have the same effect when taken as supplements
- **probiotics** – which contain live bacteria that can aid digestion and bowel function. The most common sources of probiotics with specific bacteria such as Lactobacillus or Bifidobacterium, include yoghurt, fermented milk drinks such as Yakult, or capsules containing live bacteria
- **phytochemicals** – are chemicals that may protect against certain diseases such as cardiovascular disease and some cancers. Examples include lycopene, carotenoids, isoflavones and flavonols. Dietary sources include fruits and vegetables, lentils, nuts and seeds, tea and wine
- **organic food** – is food grown without the use of pesticides and artificial fertilisers. People often prefer these foods for reasons of flavour and taste, or environmental benefits. Tests comparing organic food with food grown in the conventional way, however, show little difference in nutritional value.

Nutritional supplements

If you eat regular meals with adequate food variety you are likely to be meeting your nutritional needs without needing to take nutritional supplements. There are some exceptions, however. To find out more, see [Vitamin and mineral supplements](#).

Nutrition and fertility

If you want to have children, it's a good idea to prepare your body for pregnancy so your baby has the best environment in which to grow. First, aim to be a [healthy weight](#). If you are overweight or underweight you may have trouble conceiving.

A healthy diet and exercise program is important for fertility. Try to keep your diet in line with the [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#). Limit your intake of alcohol and caffeine at this time.

A folic acid supplement is strongly recommended if you are trying to conceive. For more information see [Folate for pregnant women](#).

Nutrition for pregnancy

Eating healthily during pregnancy is important to ensure you meet the needs of your developing baby, and for your own wellbeing.

Research has shown that what a woman eats can influence the development of her baby and may also have an effect on the baby's health in later life.

For more information, see [Healthy eating during pregnancy](#).

The latest guidelines advise that women abstain completely from drinking any alcohol during pregnancy.

Nutrition for breastfeeding

A healthy diet is always important, but it's especially important if you are breastfeeding. Breastfeeding uses a lot of energy and nutrients. It's important that your diet supplies the nutrients you need during breastfeeding, such as protein, calcium, iron and vitamins.

Find out more about [Breastfeeding and your diet](#).

Healthy weight management for young women

At some stage in their life, many women decide they are overweight and want to do something about it. Sometimes this is just a perception and their weight is actually healthy and normal, while at other times it is a realisation they really are overweight.

What is a healthy weight?

For adults over the age of 18, the healthy weight range is calculated by measuring their body mass index (BMI). If you would like to know what your BMI is and what it means, use our [Body mass index calculator](#).

Maintaining a healthy weight

Healthy weight management is about balancing the energy you take in through food, with the energy you burn. See [Balancing energy in and energy out](#) for more information.

Losing weight and dieting

There is a lot of confusing and contradictory information out there about dieting and nutrition. How many diets are there? How many really work? Many popular diets make your body think it's being starved and so it responds by making you want to eat more – ultimately you end up putting on weight.

Fad diets are just that – a fad. They are unsustainable and often don't contain enough nutrients for good health. If the diet cuts out whole food groups or contains only one food group, such as vegetables, then it is a short-term fix and after a while you'll probably be back at square one.

The sensible answer to losing excess body fat is to make small healthy changes to your eating and exercise habits. By making these changes things that you can maintain as part of your lifestyle, you'll lose weight and keep it off.

For information on healthy weight loss see [Weight loss – a healthy approach](#) and [Body image and diets](#).

Eating disorders

A distorted body image can lead to self-destructive behaviours such as dieting and binge-eating. These behaviours can predispose young women to the development of eating disorders.

Eating disorders are a type of illness. They usually start in adolescence. The two most serious are anorexia nervosa (anorexia) and bulimia nervosa (bulimia). Anorexia is characterised by an intense fear of being fat and a relentless pursuit of thinness. Bulimia is characterised by binge eating and purging.

Anorexia and bulimia are both treatable, but they can be life-threatening if severe and left untreated. It's therefore essential to identify early warning signs – such as abnormal eating patterns, ongoing loss of weight, and preoccupation with thinness and dieting – and get help as soon as possible.

See [Anorexia nervosa](#) and [Bulimia nervosa](#) for more information.

Where to get help for eating disorders

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- A GP with experience supporting people with an eating disorder
- **Eating Disorders Victoria Helpline** Tel. 1300 550 236 – support from Monday to Friday, 9.30 am to 5.00 pm
- Community health centre
- **Lifeline** Tel. 13 11 14
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800
- **Butterfly Foundation's National Support Line** Tel. 1800 ED HOPE (1800 33 4673) – support from 8 am to 12 am, 7 days a week (except national public holidays)

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