How to eat healthily

Summary

- A wide variety of foods is important for good health.
- Calcium and iron are important nutrients in our diets.
- Infants and young children should not be placed on low-fat diets.
- Encourage infants and children to choose water as their preferred drink.
- Children will have better nutrition and do better at school if they eat breakfast.
- Be physically active.

It’s easy to make little changes to bring your eating closer in line with the five [Australian dietary guidelines](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/edittopic/American-Dietary-Guidance), regardless of where you’re starting. If your current diet is quite different to the recommendations, try starting with just one or two little changes at a time rather than changing everything at once. Once those first few changes have become the norm, add a couple more. Remember, even a little step towards healthier eating is better than doing nothing at all!

If you’re not sure where to start, you can break it down into two key messages:

- Include the five food groups in your diet.
- Cut back on ‘occasional’ foods.

**Include the five food groups in your diet**

A healthy diet focuses on the five major food groups. The ‘daily serves’ tables on our Healthy eating page tell you how many serves you should be eating from each of these groups every day.

It’s not hard to include foods from the five food groups into snacks and meals. Some suggestions include:

- **vegetables and legumes or beans** – raw or cooked vegetables can be used as a snack food or as a part of...
lunch and dinner. Salad vegetables can be used as a sandwich filling. Vegetable soup can make a healthy lunch. Stir-fries, vegetable patties and vegetable curries make nutritious evening meals. Try raw vegetables like carrot and celery sticks for a snack ‘on the run’ or just keep a box of cut up raw vegetables front and centre in your fridge to catch your eye when you’re looking for an easy snack. These are perfect teamed with bean-based dips such as hummus (made from chickpeas)

- **fruit** – fruit is easy to carry as a snack and can be included in most meals. Try a banana with your breakfast cereal, an apple for morning tea, and add some berries to your yoghurt for an afternoon snack. Fresh whole fruit is recommended over fruit juice and dried fruit

- **grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain** – add rice, pasta or noodles to serves of protein (such as lean meat, fish, poultry, legumes, beans or tofu) and vegetables for an all-round meal. There are many varieties to try. Where possible, choose wholegrain breads and cereals as these will provide more nutrients and **fibre**, which helps keeps your digestive system healthy. Check the fibre content by looking at the nutrition information panel on the back of a product – choose options that have 3 g or more of fibre per serve

- **lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds** and legumes or beans – these can all provide protein. Try adding lean meat to your sandwich or have a handful of nuts as a snack. Legumes and beans can also be added to most meals (for example, soups or stews) or make meat stretch further (for example, when added to a bolognese sauce)

- **milk, yoghurt, cheese or alternatives** (mostly reduced fat) – try adding yoghurt to breakfast cereal with milk, or using cottage cheese as a sandwich filling. Shavings of parmesan or cheddar can be used to top steamed vegetables or a salad.

**Cut back on occasional foods**

In 2011–12, occasional foods provided made up just over one-third (35%) of the total daily energy consumed by Australians. Think about your own diet. If you find that much of it is made up from the foods listed as ‘occasional’ in the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating, this could be an area for you to try and improve.

**Restaurant meals and takeaway foods**

Most Australians have foods and drinks prepared outside the home on a regular basis. In 2015–16, Australians were spending around half of their weekly household food budget on foods prepared outside the home (including restaurant meals, takeaway foods and coffee).

The foods sold by takeaway outlets are often high in saturated (bad) fat, added sugars, added salt and kilojoules. High consumption may contribute to **obesity** and chronic disease, such as heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer.

Think about how often you consume food and drinks prepared outside the home. If you’re doing this regularly, consider cutting back and focussing more on the five major food groups. That doesn’t mean you have to stop completely!

Suggestions for reducing saturated fat in takeaway food options include:

- Try ordering a takeaway meal without the fries.
- Choose bread-based options like wraps, kebabs, souvlaki or hamburgers.
- Avoid deep fried and pastry options.
- Include extra vegetables and salad.
- Choose smaller portions or share with someone else and add a green salad to reduce the kilojoules of the meal.
- Limit high fat, high salt sauces and toppings like cheese, fatty meats and mayonnaise – remember, you can ask for less.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Don’t upsize unless it’s with a side salad.

Fast foods that have relatively low levels of saturated fat and added salt include:

- pizzas with less cheese and meat
- grilled chicken burgers or wraps
• grilled, lean meat hamburgers, with no cheese or bacon additions
• grilled fish burgers.

**High sugar foods**

Foods and drinks like **soft drinks**, cordials, biscuits, cakes and confectionary are high in added sugars and high in kilojoules. Sugar itself does not lead to diabetes. But added sugars can cause weight gain, and being **overweight** increases a person’s risk of type 2 diabetes.

Sugar-sweetened drinks are the largest source of sugars in the diets of Australians. There is strong evidence of an association between increasing consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and the development of childhood obesity and tooth decay. That’s why eating foods and drinks with a high sugar content should be limited.

Sugar-free versions are okay to drink sometimes, but sugar-free fizzy drinks are still acidic, which can have a negative effect on bone and dental health. Water is the healthiest drink – try adding a slice of lemon, lime or orange for flavour.

**Drink alcohol in moderation**

Alcoholic drinks are ‘occasional foods’ according to the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating. **Alcohol** is high in energy (kilojoules). If you choose to drink alcohol, only drink it in moderation.

It is recommended that healthy men and women drink no more than two standard drinks on any day to reduce the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury. And no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion to reduce the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

One standard drink is 375 ml mid-strength beer, 100 ml wine or 30 ml spirits. If you drink more than this, consider reducing this amount. You might go about this by increasing the number of days in the week where you don’t drink alcohol, or alternating your alcoholic drinks with water.

Alcohol should not be given to children and is not recommended for pregnant or breastfeeding women.

**High-salt foods**

Too much **salt** in the diet has been associated with an increased risk of high blood pressure, which is a known risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

Eating less than 5 g of salt per day (less than a teaspoon a day) is recommended for adults with normal blood pressure. Many Australians consume double this amount each day.

**Seventy-five per cent of our salt intake comes from packaged and processed foods** we eat every day, like bread, processed meats and soups. Cutting back on takeaway foods will help reduce your salt intake.

Learn ways on how to **cut down on salt**.

**Putting it all together**

If you’ve got quite a few changes to make, it can all seem a little daunting at first. You might be worried about:

• the time it will take
• knowing what to buy and how to prepare it
• what it will cost
• whether you will like eating healthier.

But you will soon get used to it. By changing the way you consider food and with a little planning, your little changes will soon add up.

**Change the way you think about food**

There are lots of myths about healthy food. Don’t make food choices based on false beliefs. Some things to try:

• Don’t think that your diet has to be ‘all or nothing’. Eating well doesn’t mean you must worry about eating healthily all the time. A good diet allows for treats occasionally.
• Compare the prices of junk foods against the price of healthier food options to see that ‘healthy’ doesn’t have to mean ‘expensive’.
• Experiment with different foods and recipes. A meal cooked with fresh ingredients is better than a limp burger or soggy chips.
• Try different ‘fast’ options like whole-wheat breakfast cereal, muesli, wholemeal bread, wholegrain muffins, fruit, yoghurt or pasta.
• When eating out, look for kilojoule labelling on menus and check before you choose. A single energy-dense meal may contain most of an adult’s daily kilojoule intake, and drinks can be high in kilojoules too.
• Don’t give up your favourite meals entirely! Try thinking of new ways to create healthy meals – for example, you could make recipes lower in fat by changing the cooking method – grill, stir-fry, bake, boil or microwave, instead of deep frying.
• Reduce the size of your meal or food instead of giving it up entirely. More doesn’t always mean better.
• If you’re worried about missing out on socialising, instead of meeting friends for food, perhaps go for a walk instead. Or, you could suggest a food outlet that serves healthier foods, such as wholemeal rolls with vegetable fillings, or sushi.

Ways to get organised

Planning ahead can make changing your dietary habits a whole lot easier:

• Make a shopping list before you shop and plan what meals you’re going to eat and when.
• Keep a filled fruit bowl at home for fast, low-kilojoule snacks.
• Vary your meals. You may get bored and lose motivation if you don’t try different ingredients and recipes.
• Search the internet to find interesting and easy recipes and cooking tips – have a read of these tasty recipes.
• Cook in bulk to save time – for example, soups, stews, casseroles and bolognese sauce are all easy to cook a lot of, and then freeze in portions for later use.
• Eat breakfast every day so you’re less likely to snack on occasional foods at morning tea. A wholemeal or wholegrain breakfast cereal that is low in sugar, served with low-fat milk, can provide plenty of vitamins, mineral and fibre. Other fast and healthy options include yoghurt or wholemeal toast.

Stock your food cupboard and fridge

Stock your food cupboard and fridge with ingredients that are quick to prepare and easy to cook.

Meal suggestions include:

• soups – easy to make and nutritious, especially if you add lots of vegetables, beans or lentils. You can use canned tomatoes and ready-made (low salt) stock as a base and add your own herbs, spices and leftovers
• pasta – quick and easy to prepare. Keep tins of tomatoes in your cupboard and add your own variations and flavours
• rice – try making fried rice or risotto, or mix cooked rice with leftover vegetables and meat
• beans and lentils – canned varieties can make a quick and nutritious addition to soups and stews. Lentils and beans can be used as a main meal with vegetables added
• vegetables and fruit – make vegetable curries, stir-fries and vegetable patties and soups. Canned and frozen vegetables can easily be added to last minute meals. Fruit is good for a quick nutritious snack
• meat and fish – tinned tuna is a great cupboard stand-by. Shop for cheap cuts of meat for slow cooking in stews and casseroles
• condiments – add flavour and interest to your cooking. Keep a selection of dried herbs, spices, curry powder, vinegars, in your cupboard. Tomato sauce, soy sauce and stock cubes also provide great flavour, but they are high in salt – use them only in small amounts.

Healthy eating on a budget

Healthy doesn’t mean expensive. Here are some ways to save money on food:

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• Cook extra for the evening meal so you can use the leftovers for a quick meal the following night or for lunch.
• Cook double the amount then freeze what is left over in meal-size portions.
• Shop at the local markets close to closing time for discounted fruit, vegetable and meat bargains.
• Buy in bulk (it’s usually cheaper) and freeze in smaller portion sizes to use as required.
• Use cheaper cuts of meat for curries and casseroles for long slow cooking, then add extra vegetables and beans to make the meal go further.
• One-pot dishes where you throw everything in together save energy, time, money and washing up.
• Watch out for supermarket specials of staples (rice, pasta, pasta sauces, bread and tinned vegetables) and stock up on them when they are cheap. Bread can be frozen for at least two months, and items such as pasta and rice have a long shelf life.
• Limit takeaway foods; they can be expensive, high in fat, high in salt, low in nutrition, and leave you hungry again a few hours after you eat them.
• Buy fresh produce in season – it’s often cheaper as it’s grown locally and fresher.

Where to get help

• Your GP (doctor)
• Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
• Nutrition Australia Tel. (03) 8431 5800

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:
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