When you start university or TAFE, it’s often the first time in your life that you have lived away from home and been fully independent. There are pluses and minuses to this new-found freedom. You are now responsible for your own health and wellbeing.

To be healthy and perform as well as you can in your studies, you need to eat healthy food, get enough sleep and do some exercise. It’s not difficult to plan, shop and cook your own meals, even if you’re on a tight budget.

Healthy diet basics for tertiary students
It will help if you’re familiar with the main things that make up a healthy diet. In general, you should aim to:

- eat a wide variety of foods
- limit your alcohol and junk food intake
- avoid eating too many foods that are high in saturated fats
- limit the amount of sugary foods
- limit salty foods
- drink plenty of water.

Get organised as a student
It may be a little daunting at first to manage your own meals. You have to find time to shop, know what to buy, prepare the food and do the cooking. But you will soon get used to it. With some planning, you can eat quick and healthy meals on a tight budget. Ways to get organised include:

- Make a shopping list before you shop and plan what meals you’re going to eat and when.
- Shop and cook with a friend who is more experienced in the kitchen than you (if possible).
- Vary your meals. You will get bored and lose motivation if you don’t experiment with different ingredients and recipes.
- Search the internet to find interesting and easy recipes and cooking tips.

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

Suggestions for meals 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 stock as a base and add your own herbs, spices and leftovers
- **pasta** – quick and easy to prepare. Keep pasta sauces 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 make a handy addition 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 stews and casseroles.
- **condiments** – add flavour and interest to your cooking. Keep a selection of dried herbs, spices, curry powder, vinegars, tomato sauce, soy sauce and stock cubes in your cupboard.

**Cooking on a budget for students**
Hints that can help you save money on food include:

- Cook extra in 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 late 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 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 and low in nutrition, and leave you hungry again a few hours after you eat them.

**Study, exams, stress and healthy eating**
Healthy eating is especially important when you are under stress. When you are rushing to try and meet deadlines, it’s easy to skip meals and forget about healthy eating. But this is when your body needs good nutrition the most.

When you are under stress or you need to concentrate, a healthy diet will help to keep you focused. You can’t keep up the pace if you only snack on takeaway food or bowls of cereal. Keep up your energy levels with healthy snacks and regular meals.

**Where to get help**
- University health centre
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Community health centre.

**Things to remember**
- Cooking for yourself is often a cheaper and healthier option than buying takeaway food.
- Stock your food cupboard and fridge with ingredients that are tasty, nutritious and easy to prepare.
- Get organised with your food shopping and meal planning, and watch out for food bargains at markets and supermarkets.
