



Diet – the facts

Research from the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) shows that it is important to eat a healthy and varied diet. Information supplied in this section draws from the BNF.

The importance of a healthy and varied diet

A good diet is important for good health. A healthy and varied diet can help to maintain a healthy body weight, enhance general wellbeing and reduce the risk of a number of diseases including heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis.

What is a healthy diet?

A healthy diet is a diet based on breads, potatoes, and other cereals and is rich in fruits and vegetables. A healthy diet will include moderate amounts of milk and dairy products, meat, fish or meat/milk alternatives and limited amounts of foods containing fat or sugar.

No single food can provide all the essential nutrients that the body needs. Therefore, it is important to consume a wide variety of foods to provide adequate intakes of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre, which are important for health.

Why is balance important?

No single food contains all the essential nutrients the body needs to be healthy and function efficiently. The nutritional value of a person's diet depends on the overall mixture, or balance, of foods that is eaten over a period of time, as well as on the needs of the individual. That is why a balanced diet is one that is likely to include a large number or variety of foods, so adequate intakes of all the nutrients are achieved.

We need energy to live, but the balance between carbohydrate, fat and protein must be right for us to remain healthy. Too little protein can interfere with growth and other body functions, too much fat can lead to obesity and heart disease. Adequate intakes of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre are important for health, and there is growing evidence that a number of bioactive plant substances (also termed phytochemicals) found in fruit and vegetables are also important in promoting good health.

In the UK, the Food Standards Agency has developed a programme called The Balance of Good Health to show people what proportions and types of foods make up a healthy balanced diet.

This divides foods into five different groups:

1. fruit and vegetables
2. bread, other cereals and potatoes
3. milk and dairy foods
4. meat, fish and alternatives
5. foods containing fat and foods containing sugar

1. Fruit and vegetables

Fresh, frozen, dried and canned fruit and vegetables all count. Also, 100% fruit or vegetable juice and pure fruit juice 'Smoothies' count. Beans and pulses, such as baked beans and lentils also contribute to this group.

What these foods give us

Vitamin C: needed for healthy skin and tissue, also to aid the absorption of iron

Carotenes: required for growth and development

Folate: needed for red blood cells

Fibre: keeps the gut healthy and helps prevent constipation

Carbohydrate: a source of energy

Phytochemicals: may help protect against some diseases

2. Breads, other cereals and potatoes

This food group, sometimes referred to as 'starchy carbohydrates', includes bread, potatoes (including low fat oven chips), yams, breakfast cereals, pasta, rice, oats, noodles, maize, millet and cornmeal.

What these foods give us

Carbohydrate: a source of energy

Fibre: keeps the gut healthy and helps prevent constipation

Some **calcium:** required for the development and maintenance of healthy bones

Some **iron:** needed for healthy red blood cells

B vitamins: e.g. thiamin and niacin – which help the body use energy

Folate: needed for red blood cells

3. Milk and dairy foods

This food group includes milk, cheese, yogurt and fromage frais. Calcium fortified soya alternatives to milk can also be included. This group does not include butter, eggs and cream as these fall into other food groups.

What these foods give us

Calcium: needed for development and maintenance of healthy bones

Zinc: required for tissue growth and repair

Protein: needed for growth and repair, and also a source of energy

Vitamin B₁₂: required for blood cells and nerve function

Vitamin B₂: needed for the release of energy from carbohydrates and protein

Vitamin A: (in whole milk products) for growth, development and eyesight

4. Meat, fish and alternatives

This food group includes meat, poultry, fish, eggs and alternatives (see below). Meat products include bacon, salami, sausages, beefburgers and paté. Fish includes frozen and canned fish such as sardines and tuna, fish fingers and fish cakes.

What these foods give us

Protein: needed for growth and repair, also a source of energy

Iron: especially red meat, needed for healthy red blood cells

B Vitamins: especially vitamin B₁₂ (required for blood cells and nerve function)

Vitamin D: in meat, required for healthy bones

Zinc: required for tissue growth and repair

Magnesium: helps the body use energy. Needed for healthy tissues and bones

Omega-3 fatty acids: in oily fish, may help protect against heart disease

5. Foods containing fat and foods containing sugar

Foods containing fat

Margarine, butter, other spreading fats and low fat spreads, cooking oils, oil-based salad dressings, mayonnaise, cream, fried foods including fried chips, chocolate, crisps, biscuits, pastries, cake, puddings, ice-cream, rich sauces and gravies are all in this food group because they contain fat.

Foods containing sugar

Soft drinks (not diet drinks), sweets, jam and sugar, as well as foods such as cakes, puddings, biscuits, pastries and ice-cream.

What about salt?

Salt is needed for the body to function properly. However, many of us consume much more than is needed. The Government recommends that the average intake of salt should be reduced by a third to 6g/day for adults; less for children. Choose foods that are low in salt, and try to avoid adding salt to foods during cooking and at the table. Sodium is often labelled on foods rather than salt - to roughly convert sodium to salt simply multiply the sodium figure by 2.5.

What about supplements?

For most healthy people, a varied and balanced diet will provide all the vitamins and minerals the body needs. There are certain times in our lives when we may benefit from taking supplements but remember supplements cannot replace a healthy diet. If you think that your diet is not meeting your nutrient requirements, a multivitamin and mineral supplement may be of benefit. Avoid supplements with high doses of single vitamins or minerals as these may well be unnecessary and should not be taken without seeking medical advice.

What about pregnancy?

Pregnant women should follow a healthy balanced diet at all times, however specific dietary advice exists with regards to a number of foods. Please consult your Doctor for further information and guidance.

What about fluids?

The amount of fluid we need varies from person to person - age, climate, diet and physical activity all have an influence. Intakes of 1.5 to 2 litres of fluids a day are recommended in temperate climates and this includes water and other drinks like squash, fruit juices, tea and coffee. Some of our fluid requirement comes from the food we eat, rather than drinks - this counts too. Don't confuse the need to drink fluid with drinking alcohol! Drink sensibly! This means a maximum of 3-4 units per day for men and 2-3 units per day for women. A unit is 25ml of spirits (standard pub measure), 125ml (small glass) of wine or half a pint of standard strength lager, beer or cider. Drinking more than recommended can have adverse effects on your health. Avoid binge drinking in particular.

Top 10 tips for maintaining a balanced diet

1. Enjoy your food
2. Be alert to any inappropriate eating habits, such as binge eating
3. Eat a variety of different foods
4. Eat the right amount to be a healthy weight
5. Eat plenty of foods rich in starch and fibre
6. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables (5 portions a day)
7. Don't eat too many foods that contain a lot of fat
8. Don't have sugary foods and drinks too often
9. Monitor your salt intake
10. If you drink alcohol, drink sensibly

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