

Eating a balanced diet

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is an important part of maintaining good health, and can help you feel your best.

This means eating a wide variety of foods in the right proportions, and consuming the right amount of food and drink to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.

This page covers healthy eating advice for the general population.

People with special dietary needs or a medical condition should ask their doctor or a registered dietitian for advice.

Food groups in your diet

The Eatwell Guide shows that to have a healthy, balanced diet, people should try to:

- eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day (see 5 A Day)
- base meals on higher fibre starchy foods like potatoes, bread, rice or pasta
- have some dairy or dairy alternatives (such as soya drinks)
- eat some beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other protein
- choose unsaturated oils and spreads, and eat them in small amounts
- drink plenty of fluids (at least 6 to 8 glasses a day)

If you're having foods and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar, have these less often and in small amounts.

Try to choose a variety of different foods from the 5 main food groups to get a wide range of nutrients.

Most people in the UK eat and drink too many calories, too much saturated fat, sugar and salt, and not enough fruit, vegetables, oily fish or fibre.

The Eatwell Guide does not apply to children under the age of 2 because they have different nutritional needs.

Between the ages of 2 and 5 years, children should gradually move to eating the same foods as the rest of the family in the proportions shown in the Eatwell Guide.

Fruit and vegetables: are you getting your 5 A Day?

Fruit and vegetables are a good source of vitamins and minerals and fibre, and should make up just over a third of the food you eat each day.

It's recommended that you eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day. They can be fresh, frozen, canned, dried or juiced.

There's evidence that people who eat at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day have a lower risk of heart disease, stroke and some cancers.

Eating 5 portions is not as hard as it sounds.

A portion is:

- 80g of fresh, canned or frozen fruit and vegetables
- 30g of dried fruit – which should be kept to mealtimes
- 150ml glass of fruit juice or smoothie – but do not have more than 1 portion a day as these drinks are sugary and can damage teeth

Just 1 apple, banana, pear or similar-sized fruit is 1 portion each.

A slice of pineapple or melon is also 1 portion, and 3 heaped tablespoons of vegetables is another portion.

Adding a tablespoon of dried fruit, such as raisins, to your morning cereal is an easy way to get 1 portion.

You could also swap your mid-morning biscuit for a banana, and add a side salad to your lunch.

In the evening, have a portion of vegetables with dinner and fresh fruit with plain, lower fat yoghurt for dessert to reach your 5 A Day.

Find out more about what counts towards your 5 A Day

Starchy foods in your diet

Starchy foods should make up just over a third of everything you eat. This means your meals should be based on these foods.

Choose wholegrain or wholemeal varieties of starchy foods, such as brown rice, wholewheat pasta, and brown, wholemeal or higher fibre white bread.

They contain more fibre, and usually more vitamins and minerals, than white varieties.

Potatoes with the skins on are a great source of fibre and vitamins. For example, when having boiled potatoes or a jacket potato, eat the skin too.

Find out more about starchy foods

Milk and dairy foods (and alternatives)

Milk and dairy foods, such as cheese and yoghurt, are good sources of protein. They also contain calcium, which helps keep your bones healthy.

Go for lower fat and lower sugar products where possible.

Choose semi-skimmed, 1% fat or skimmed milk, as well as lower fat hard cheeses or cottage cheese, and lower fat, lower sugar yoghurt.

Dairy alternatives, such as soya drinks, are also included in this food group.

When buying alternatives, choose unsweetened, calcium-fortified versions.

Find out more about milk and dairy foods

Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins

These foods are all good sources of protein, which is essential for the body to grow and repair itself.

They're also good sources of a range of vitamins and minerals.

Meat is a good source of protein, vitamins and minerals, including iron, zinc and B vitamins. It's also one of the main sources of vitamin B12.

Choose lean cuts of meat and skinless poultry whenever possible to cut down on fat. Always cook meat thoroughly.

Try to eat less red and processed meat like bacon, ham and sausages.

Find out more about including meat in your diet

Eggs and fish are also good sources of protein, and contain many vitamins and minerals. Oily fish is particularly rich in omega-3 fatty acids.

Aim to eat at least 2 portions of fish a week, including 1 portion of oily fish.

You can choose from fresh, frozen or canned, but remember that canned and smoked fish can often be high in salt.

Pulses, including beans, peas and lentils, are naturally very low in fat and high in fibre, protein, vitamins and minerals.

Nuts are high in fibre, and unsalted nuts make a good snack. But they do still contain high levels of fat, so eat them in moderation.

Oils and spreads

Some fat in the diet is essential, but on average people in the UK eat too much saturated fat.

It's important to get most of your fat from unsaturated oils and spreads.

Swapping to unsaturated fats can help lower cholesterol.

Remember that all types of fat are high in energy and should be eaten in small amounts.

Find out more about the different types of fats

Eat less saturated fat, sugar and salt

Too much saturated fat can increase the amount of cholesterol in the blood, which increases your risk of developing heart disease.

Regularly consuming foods and drinks high in sugar increases your risk of obesity and tooth decay.

Eating too much salt can raise your blood pressure, which increases your risk of getting heart disease or having a stroke.

See 8 tips for healthy eating to find out more about why you need to cut down on saturated fat, sugar and salt, which foods they're found in, and how to make healthier choices.

Find out more about how to eat less saturated fat

Need to lose weight?

Most adults in England are overweight or obese. Check whether you're a healthy weight using the BMI calculator.

If you need to lose weight, you can use the NHS weight loss plan. It's a free 12-week diet and exercise plan to help you lose weight and develop healthier habits. It has been designed to help you lose weight safely, and keep it off.