

Healthy Eating for Adults & Older Adults

Good nutrition can help you stay healthy and active now and into your later adult years.

Eat Real Food Prioritize a diet built on whole, nutrient-dense foods. Choose a variety of healthy foods from these food groups:



Protein foods — such as eggs, poultry, seafood, and meat from animal sources, and plant-based sources, such as beans, peas, lentils, legumes, nuts, seeds, and soy.



Dairy — such as milk, yogurt, cheese, and, depending on your dietary needs, lactose-free or lactose-reduced products or fortified dairy alternatives.



Vegetables — such as broccoli, carrots, spinach, peppers, sweet potatoes, beets, okra, and jicama.



Fruits — such as berries, apples, oranges, bananas, grapes, and mangos.



Healthy fats — found in many whole foods, including seafood (especially salmon, sardines, and other fatty fish that provide omega-3 fats), nuts, seeds, avocados, eggs, dairy, meat, poultry, and olive oil.



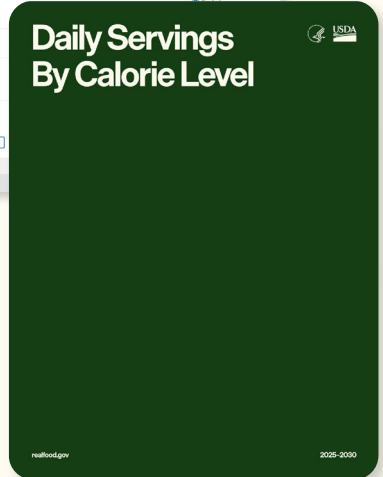
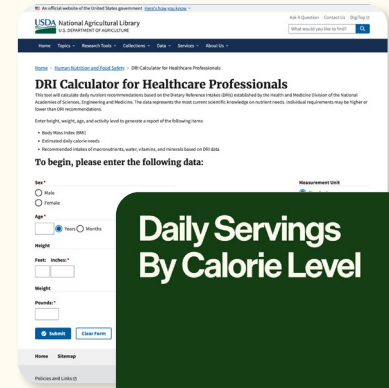
Whole grains — such as brown rice, fiber-rich whole-grain bread, oatmeal, and whole-grain pasta.



Eat the Right Amount for You

The number of calories you need each day depends on your age, weight, height, and sex and how much physical activity you get. Most people need fewer daily calories as they get older.

- Use the **Dietary Reference Intake (DRI) Calculator** to estimate how many calories and nutrients you need each day: nal.usda.gov/human-nutrition-and-food-safety/dri-calculator
- Visit the **Daily Servings Guide** for serving size suggestions for each food group based on your daily calorie needs: [cdn.realfood.gov/Daily Serving Sizes_508.pdf](https://cdn.realfood.gov/Daily%20Serving%20Sizes_508.pdf)



Get the Nutrients You Need

Getting the nutrients your body needs can help you stay healthy. Choose healthy foods to ensure that you get enough of these nutrients:

Dietary fiber helps keep your digestion regular and supports heart health. It can also help you feel full longer. Choose whole grains, such as whole-grain bread, brown rice, and oatmeal. Fruits, vegetables, beans, peas, and lentils are also good sources of fiber.



Calcium supports strong bones and helps keep your muscles, nerves, and blood vessels healthy. Dairy products and fortified dairy alternatives, canned sardines and salmon, and leafy greens, such as kale and bok choy, are all good sources of calcium.

Vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium to keep your bones strong. Choose dairy products, including milk and yogurt. Many kinds of fish, such as mackerel, salmon, and trout, also have vitamin D. Some adults may need a vitamin D supplement to get enough of this important nutrient.





Potassium helps your muscles work properly and supports healthy blood pressure. Choose foods such as fruits and vegetables, especially avocados, bananas, oranges, potatoes, tomatoes, and leafy greens. Beans, peas, lentils, and dairy products, including milk and yogurt, also provide potassium.

Folate is important for healthy blood cells and nervous systems. Getting enough folate is especially important for young women who are thinking about trying to have a baby. Choose protein foods like beans, peas, and lentils, as well as dark green vegetables, including spinach and broccoli.



Iron helps blood carry oxygen to your muscles and other parts of your body. Young women in particular should be sure to get enough iron in their diet. Many protein foods are good sources of iron, such as beef, turkey, crab, shrimp, beans, peas, and lentils. You can also get iron from dark green vegetables, such as spinach and Swiss chard, and fortified whole-grain breakfast cereals. Pair your iron-containing foods with foods high in vitamin C, such as oranges, tomatoes, or bell peppers, to increase absorption of iron.

Vitamin B12 helps keep your blood and nerves healthy. It's especially important for older adults (age 65 and over) to prioritize vitamin B12. Choose protein foods such as meat, seafood, and eggs. Dairy products including milk and yogurt, as well as fortified dairy alternatives, are also good sources of vitamin B12. Some older adults may need a supplement to get enough vitamin B12.



How can I make eating healthy more enjoyable?

Sharing meals with others can make healthy eating easier and more enjoyable. Try eating meals with friends and family, joining a neighborhood potluck, or hosting a group meal at a community space, such as a college campus, library, or senior center.

Enjoying good food together can make healthy habits easier to stick with.

Avoid Highly Processed Foods, Added Sugars, and Refined Carbohydrates

Everyone should avoid eating highly processed foods, added sugars, and refined carbohydrates. That means:

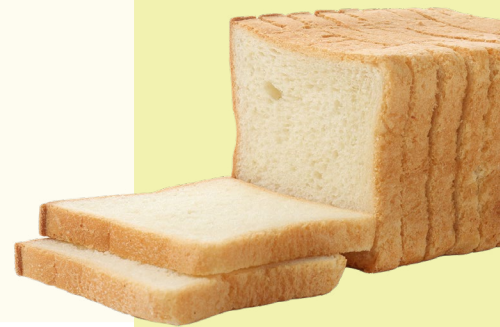
✓ Choose

Choose whole vegetables and fruits, which are naturally low in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium.



– Limit

Limit highly processed, refined carbohydrates (processing removes fiber and nutrients), such as white bread, ready-to-eat or packaged breakfast options, flour tortillas, and crackers.



✗ Avoid

Avoid highly processed packaged, prepared, ready-to-eat foods that are high in added sugars (for example, from table sugar, syrups, and honey) and sodium. These foods include snacks, desserts, and candy.

Avoid sugar-sweetened beverages, such as soda, fruit drinks, sugary coffee and tea, and energy drinks. Choose sparkling water, still water, or unsweetened beverages instead, and add fruits or herbs for extra flavor.



How can I track added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium in my diet?

Many highly processed foods are high in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. The Nutrition Facts label can help you choose foods low in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. A percent (%) Daily Value of 5% or less of a nutrient is generally considered low. More often, choose foods that are lower in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium.

Here are some more tips:

✓ Choose

Choose foods that are lower in added sugars.

For example:

- Whole-grain cereal (such as oatmeal) with no more than 2.5 grams of added sugars per serving
- A dairy snack (such as yogurt) with no more than 2.5 grams of added sugars per serving

– Limit

Limit added sugars to 10 grams or less at each meal.

Keep in mind that no amount of added sugars is recommended as part of a healthy diet.

Limit saturated fat to 10% or less of your daily calories.

For example, if you're eating 2,000 calories a day, aim for less than about 20 grams (200 calories) of saturated fat.

Limit sodium to less than 2,300 milligrams (mg) per day.

As you age, your body may become more sensitive to sodium.

Ask your health care provider if eating less sodium is best for you.

Nutrition Facts

8 servings per container

Serving size 2/3 cup (55g)

Amount per serving

Calories 230

% Daily Value

Total Fat 8g 10%

Saturated Fat 1g 5%

Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol 0mg 0%

Sodium 160mg 7%

Total Carbohydrate 37g 13%

Dietary Fiber 4g 14%

Total Sugars 12g

Includes 10g Added Sugars 20%

Protein 3g

Vitamin D 2mcg 10%

Calcium 260mg 20%

Iron 8mg 45%

Potassium 235mg 6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.



What eating and drinking habits can help me stay healthy as I get older?

Aging can affect how — and how much — you eat and drink:

- You might find you aren't as hungry. And if you're eating less, it can be hard to get enough important nutrients. Prioritize foods that are good sources of the nutrients you need.
- You may not feel thirsty, but staying hydrated is important for your health. Drink water or other fluids throughout the day to stay hydrated.
- You may have more trouble chewing or swallowing food. Eat slowly and take small bites to lower the risk of choking. Try dishes that have a softer texture, such as poached or scrambled eggs, oatmeal, or steamed carrots. You can also talk with a doctor about ways to make eating more comfortable.



What are the benefits of eating real food?

Eating a diet built on real, nutrient-dense food can lower your risk of health problems, including:

- Overweight and obesity
- Heart disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- Some cancers
- Age-related cognitive decline
- Dementia, like Alzheimer's disease

Talk with your doctor about the healthy eating routine that's best for you.

How can I fit healthy food into my budget?

Consider these tips:

- To get the best price on fresh produce, try buying vegetables and fruits when they're in season. When the vegetables and fruits you want aren't in season, check out frozen, dried, or canned options, which are just as nutritious, can be more affordable, and last longer. Choose options with little or no added sugars or sodium.
- Make a plan before you go to the grocery store. Make a shopping list with what you need for your weekly meals so you only buy what you need. Check for coupons from store flyers or the store's app.
- When you are at the store, choose generic or store brands, which are often less expensive than other brands.
- Cook large batch meals, such as casseroles and soups, that you can enjoy throughout the week or freeze as leftovers for later.



Check out these resources

- Check out food assistance programs that could help you or your family: fna.usda.gov/programs
- Find food banks and meal programs in your area: nutrition.gov/topics/food-security-and-access/food-assistance-programs

If you are an older adult, these tips and resources can help you afford healthy foods:

- Consider asking about discounts at grocery stores and farmers markets
- Explore food assistance programs for older adults: usa.gov/senior-food-programs
- Find support through your local area agency on aging: eldercare.acl.gov/home



Keep These Tips in Mind

Food Safety

Wash whole vegetables and fruits well before cooking or eating them raw. Food safety is especially important for older adults, who are more likely to get sick from germs in food. For more tips, visit [FoodSafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov).

Water and Hydration

Water helps you stay hydrated without adding calories, and many adults don't drink enough. Try having a glass of water with every meal. Choose still water, sparkling water, or unsweetened drinks, such as milk, coffee, and tea. And don't forget: The water in foods, including soups, fruits, and vegetables, counts, too.

Vitamins and Supplements

It's best to get most of the nutrients you need from food and drinks. Talk with your doctor before you start taking any supplements. Keep in mind that some supplements may interact with medications you are taking.

Alcohol

Drinking less alcohol is always better for your health. It's best to avoid alcohol if you are pregnant, recovering from alcohol use disorder, or unable to control the amount you drink. You should also avoid alcohol if you are taking any medications, or you have a medical condition that can interact with alcohol.

Learn More About Healthy Eating

Visit [RealFood.gov](https://www.realfood.gov) to learn about healthy eating and about the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. For more resources, please visit odphp.health.gov/HealthyEating.

