

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Good Nutrition Essential to Your Health | March 2022



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Good Nutrition Essential to Your Health

Most people know good nutrition, combined with routine exercise, helps control their weight. However, the benefits of good nutrition go beyond weight management. A healthy diet:

- Reduces risk of diabetes, stroke, some types of cancer and osteoporosis

- Lowers risk of heart disease and high blood pressure, the “silent killer”
- Helps prevent cholesterol from building up and clogging arteries
- Boosts immunity and promotes recovery from an illness or injury
- Increases energy, alertness and concentration
- Relieves symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety

Good nutrition means your body is getting all the nutrients, vitamins and minerals it needs for optimal performance. According to [*Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025*](#), meals and snacks should include nutrient-dense foods that are low in calories. The guidelines focus on healthy eating patterns at every stage of life. Key recommendations for adults include limiting:

- Added sugars to less than 1 percent of calories per day
- Saturated fats to less than 10 percent of calories per day
- Sodium intake to less than 2,300 mg per day
- Alcoholic beverages to two drinks for men and one drink a day for women (or less)

Your diet should include whole fresh fruits that are high in fiber and vegetables in a variety of colors and types, either cooked or raw. At least half of the cereals, bread, crackers and pasta you eat should be made from whole grains. Dairy products should be low-fat or fat-free. If you eat meat, cuts should be lean. Fish, beans and tofu also provide protein.

Evidence of Good Nutrition

There are ways to tell if you are getting the nutrition you need to fuel your body. Here are some examples:

1. Monitor your cholesterol levels and blood pressure numbers. Dietary fat can affect your blood-cholesterol levels, and excessive sodium contributes to elevated blood pressure (hypertension).
2. If you are getting enough nutrients, your skin should be firm and supple, not dry and flaky. Your hair should be smooth and strong rather than dry and brittle. Unexplained hair loss is often a sign of malnutrition. Nail problems often indicate a deficiency of certain vitamins or minerals.
3. A healthy diet will help you stay energized and promote restful sleep. If you find yourself feeling sluggish, it could be a sign of a lack of calories and/or nutrients. Restorative capabilities that occur during sleep decline when your body is in “starvation mode.”
4. If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. Alcohol inhibits your body’s ability to absorb and use vital nutrients such as thiamin (vitamin B1), vitamin B12, folic acid and zinc.
1. Gradually replace less nutritious foods with more nutritious ones, similar to the way new foods are introduced to a baby who is starting to eat solids.
2. To control portions, make just enough for one meal, use a smaller plate and do not have second helpings.
3. Set goals that go beyond weight loss and calories burned. For example, your goal may be to run in a race, play with grandchildren, manage a chronic condition or save money by cooking more often at home.
4. Make exercise part of your daily life. There are many options that are good for year-round fitness in combination with a healthy diet.
5. Seek support from friends and family members. Exchange recipes. Cheer on others with positive affirmations.
6. Make a shopping list that fits your budget. Fill your shelves and refrigerator with food preferences that match your nutritional goals. Try growing your own fresh fruits and vegetables.
7. Be mindful about what, when, where and how you eat. Check product labels. Whenever possible, make meals a social activity. Pay attention to how you feel after eating. Give your brain time to recognize that you feel full – it takes about 20 minutes.

Food and Your Mental Health

What you eat affects the structure and function of your brain, and ultimately your mood. Many processed foods are addictive because they contain ingredients that stimulate the dopamine centers in your brain that are associated with pleasure and reward. To stop craving unhealthy foods containing added sugars and refined carbohydrates, you have to stop eating them to change the physiology in your brain.

Studies have found that high intakes of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, olive oil, fish, low-fat dairy products and antioxidants, as well as low intakes of animal foods, are associated with reduced risk of depression. Diets high in saturated fat and added sugars are associated with higher levels of anxiety.

What Can You Do?

If you want to make changes in your diet, here are some recommendations:

It’s not necessary to take dietary supplements when you eat a balanced diet. Whether you shop at the grocery store, farmer’s market or grow your own fruits and vegetables, good nutrition begins with awareness.

Did You Know?

March is **National Nutrition Month**, an annual campaign sponsored by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics focused on making informed food choices and developing healthful eating and physical activity habits.