



HEALTH

Dietary Guidelines for Americans **no. 9.353**

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Quick Facts...

Eat a variety of foods.

Balance the food you eat with physical activity--maintain or improve your weight.

Choose a diet with plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits.

Choose a diet low in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol.

Choose a diet moderate in sugars.

Choose a diet moderate in salt and sodium.

If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.

What should you eat to stay healthy? These guidelines help answer this question and are intended for healthy Americans 2 years and older. They are not designed for younger children and infants whose dietary needs different. This advice is based on current nutrition research.

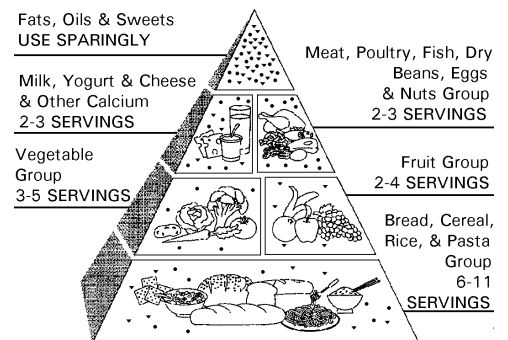
Healthful diets contain the amounts of essential nutrients and calories needed to prevent nutritional deficiencies and excesses. Healthful diets also provide the right balance of carbohydrate, fat, and protein to reduce risks for chronic diseases, and are a part of a full and productive lifestyle. Such diets are obtained from a variety of foods that are available, affordable, and enjoyable.

The food guide pyramid (see fact sheet 9.306, *Guide for Daily Food Choices*) and the nutrition facts label (see 9.365, *The New Food Label*) serve as educational tools to put the dietary guidelines into practice. The pyramid translates the Recommended Dietary Allowances and the dietary guidelines into the kinds and amounts of food to eat each day. The nutrition facts label is designed to help you select foods for a diet that will meet the dietary guidelines. Most processed foods now include nutrition information. However, nutrition labels are not required for foods like coffee and tea (which contain no significant amounts of nutrients), certain ready-to-eat foods like unpackaged deli and bakery items, and restaurant food. Labels are also voluntary for many raw foods--your grocer may supply this information for the fish, meat, poultry, and raw fruits and vegetables that are consumed most frequently. Use the nutrition facts label to choose a healthful diet.

Food alone cannot make you healthy. Good eating habits based on moderation and variety can help keep you healthy and even improve your health.

Eat a variety of foods

Foods contain combinations of nutrients and other healthful substances. No single food can supply all nutrients in the amounts you need. To make sure you get all of the nutrients and other substances needed for health, choose the recommended number of daily servings from each of the five major food groups displayed in the food guide pyramid (Figure 1).



◆ Fats (naturally occurring and added)
▼ Sugars (added)
These symbols show fat and added sugars in foods. They come mostly from the fats, oils and sweets group. But the foods in other groups--such as cheese or ice cream from the milk group or french fries from the vegetable group-- can also provide fats and added sugars.

Figure 1: Food Pyramid.

Advice for Today

Enjoy eating a variety of foods. Get the many nutrients your body needs by choosing among the varied foods you enjoy from the five major food groups. Remember to choose lean and lowfat foods and beverages most often. Many foods you eat contain servings from more than one food group. For example, soups and stews may contain meat, beans, noodles, and vegetables.

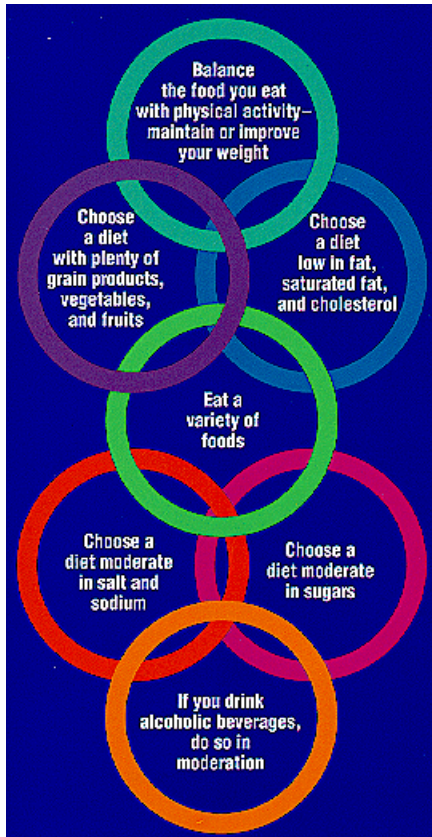


Figure 2. Dietary guidelines for Americans.

Advice for today. Try to maintain your body weight by balancing what you eat with physical activity. If your weight is not in the healthy range, try to reduce health risks through better eating and exercise habits. Take steps to keep your weight within the healthy range (neither too high nor too low). Have children's heights and weights checked regularly by a health professional.

Supplements of vitamins, minerals, or fiber may help to meet special nutritional needs. However, supplements do not supply all of the nutrients and other substances present in foods that are important to health. Supplements of some nutrients taken regularly in large amounts are harmful. Daily vitamin and mineral supplements at or below the Recommended Dietary Allowances are considered safe, but are usually not needed by people who eat the variety of foods illustrated in the food guide pyramid.

A healthy diet must consist of a variety of foods. Thus, the guideline “Eat a variety of foods” is in the center of the dietary guidelines diagram (Figure 2). All the other recommendations fall around this one.

Balance the Food You Eat With Physical Activity — Maintain or Improve Your Weight

Many Americans gain weight in adulthood, increasing their risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, certain types of cancer, arthritis, breathing problems, and other illness. Therefore, most adults should not gain weight. If you are overweight and have one of these problems, you should try to lose weight, or at the very least, not gain weight. If you are uncertain about your risk of developing a problem associated with overweight, you should consult a health professional.

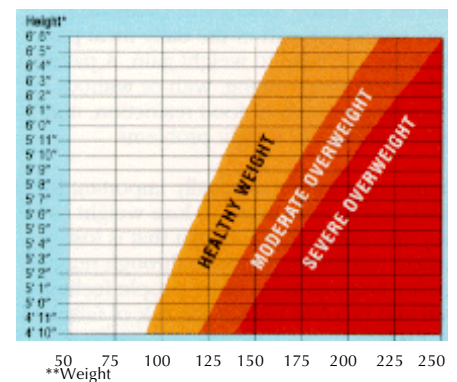
In order to stay at the same body weight, people must balance the amount of calories in the foods and drinks they consume with the amount of calories the body uses. Physical activity is an important way to use food energy. Most Americans spend much of their working day and leisure time in activities that require little energy. Try to spend at least 30 minutes over a day doing moderate physical activity on most—preferably all—days of the week.

Healthy weight ranges for adult men and women of all ages are shown in Figure 3. Weight ranges are shown in the chart because people of the same height may have equal amounts of body fat but different amounts of muscle and bone. However, the ranges do not mean that it is healthy to gain weight, even within the same weight range. The higher weights in the healthy weight range apply to people with more muscle and bone.

Weights above the healthy weight range are less healthy for most people. The further you are above the healthy weight range for your height, the higher your weight-related risk. Weights slightly below the range may be healthy for some people but are sometimes the result of health problems, especially when weight loss is unintentional.

You do not need to lose weight if your weight is already within the healthy range in the figure, if you have gained less than 10 pounds since you reached your adult height, and if you are otherwise healthy. If you are overweight and have excess abdominal fat, a weight-related medical problem, or a family history of such problems, you need to lose weight. Healthy diets and exercise can help people maintain a healthy weight, and may also help them lose weight. It is important to recognize that overweight is a chronic condition which can only be controlled with long-term changes. As people lose weight, the body becomes more efficient at

using energy and the rate of weight loss may decrease.



*Without shoes.
**Without clothes. The higher weights apply to people with more muscle and bone, such as many men.

Figure 3. Healthy weight ranges for adult men and women. Source: Report of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 1995, pp. 23-24.

Advice for Today

Eat more grain products (breads, cereals, pasta, and rice), vegetables, and fruits. Eat dry beans, lentils, and peas more often. Increase your fiber intake by eating more of a variety of whole grains, whole-grain products, dry beans, fiber-rich vegetables and fruits.

Increased physical activity will help you to continue losing weight and to avoid gaining it back. Choose a diet with plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits.

This guideline recommends that adults eat at least six servings of grain products (breads, cereals, pasta and rice) daily, with emphasis on whole grains. It recommends at least three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruits daily. Also encourage children to eat plenty of these foods.

Grain products, vegetables, and fruits are key parts of a varied diet. They are emphasized in this guideline because they provide vitamins, minerals, complex carbohydrates (starch and dietary fiber), and other substances that are important for good health. They are generally low in fat, depending on how they are prepared and what is added to them at the table. Most Americans of all ages eat fewer than the recommended number of servings of grain products, vegetables, and fruits, even though consumption of these foods is associated with a substantially lower risk for many chronic diseases, including certain types of cancer.

Fiber is found only in plant foods like whole-grain breads and cereals, beans and peas, other vegetables and fruits. Dry beans are included in the meat and beans group of the food guide pyramid, but they can count as servings of vegetables instead of meat alternatives. Because there are different types of fiber in foods, choose a variety of foods daily. Eating a variety of fiber-containing plant foods is important for proper bowel function, can reduce symptoms of chronic constipation, diverticular disease, and hemorrhoids, and may lower the risk for heart disease and some cancers. However, some of the health benefits associated with a high-fiber diet may come from other components present in these foods, not just from fiber itself. For this reason, fiber is best obtained from foods rather than supplements.

Choose a Diet Low in Fat, Saturated Fat, and Cholesterol

Some dietary fat is needed for good health. Fats supply energy and essential fatty acids and promote absorption of the fat soluble vitamins A, D, E, and K. Most people are aware that high levels of saturated fat and cholesterol in the diet are linked to increased blood cholesterol levels and a greater risk for heart disease. More Americans are now eating less fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol-rich foods than in the recent past, and fewer people are dying from the most common form of heart disease.

Still, many people continue to eat high-fat diets, the number of overweight people has increased, and the risk of heart disease and certain cancers (also linked to fat intake) remains high. This guideline emphasizes the continued importance of choosing a diet with less total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol.

The way diet affects blood cholesterol varies among individuals. However, blood cholesterol does increase in most people when they eat a diet high in saturated fat and cholesterol and excessive in calories. Of these, dietary saturated fat has the greatest effect; dietary cholesterol has less.

Suggested goals for the American diet are as follows:

Total fat:	30 percent or less of calories
Saturated fat:	Less than 10 percent of calories
Cholesterol:	Restrict dietary cholesterol to 300 mg or less daily.

These goals for fat and cholesterol do not apply to infants and toddlers below the age of 2 years. After that age, children should gradually adopt a diet that, by about 5 years of age, contains no more than 30 percent of calories from fat. As they begin to consume fewer calories from fat, children should replace these calories by eating more grain products, fruits, vegetables, and lowfat milk

Advice for Today

Use fats and oils sparingly. Use the Nutrition facts Label to help you choose foods lower in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. Eat plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits. Choose lowfat milk products, lean meats, fish, poultry, beans, and peas to get essential nutrients without substantially increasing calorie and saturated fat intakes.

Advice for Today

Use sugars in moderation — sparingly if your calorie needs are low. Avoid excessive snacking, brush with a fluoride toothpaste, and floss your teeth regularly. Read the Nutrition Facts Label for total carbohydrate and sugar content, as well as calorie content of foods.

products or other calcium-rich foods, and beans, lean meat, poultry, fish, or other protein-rich foods.

Note: These goals for fats apply to the diet over several days, not to a single meal or food. Some foods that contain fat, saturated fat and cholesterol (meats, milk, cheese and eggs) also contain high-quality protein and are our best sources of certain vitamins and minerals. Lowfat choices of these foods are lean meat, lowfat milk and cheeses.

Choose a Diet Moderate in Sugars

Some foods that contain a lot of sugars supply calories but few or no nutrients. For very active people with high calorie needs, sugars can be an additional source of energy. However, because maintaining a nutritious diet and healthy weight is very important, sugars should be used in moderation by most healthy people and sparingly by people with low calorie needs. This guideline cautions about eating sugars in large amounts and about frequent snacks of food and beverages containing sugars that supply unnecessary calories and few nutrients.

Scientific evidence indicates that diets high in sugars do not cause hyperactivity or diabetes. The most common type of diabetes occurs in overweight adults. Avoiding sugars alone will not correct overweight.

Both sugars and starches can promote tooth decay. The more often you eat foods that contain sugars and starches, and the longer these foods are in your mouth before you brush your teeth, the greater the risk for tooth decay. Thus, frequent eating of foods high in sugars and starches as between-meal snacks may be more harmful to your teeth than eating them at meals and then brushing.

Choose a Diet Moderate in Salt and Sodium

In the body, sodium plays an essential role in regulation of fluid and blood pressure. Many studies in diverse populations have shown that a high sodium intake is associated with higher blood pressure. Most evidence suggests that many people at risk for high blood pressure reduce their chances of developing this condition by consuming less salt or sodium. Some questions remain, partly because other factors may interact with sodium to affect blood pressure.

Following other guidelines in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* may also help prevent high blood pressure. An important example is the guideline on weight and physical activity. The role of body weight in blood pressure control is well documented. Blood pressure increases with weight and decreases when weight is reduced.

The guideline to consume a diet with plenty of vegetables and fruits is relevant because vegetables and fruits are naturally lower in sodium and fat and may help with weight reduction and control. Consuming more vegetables and fruits also increases potassium intakes which may help to reduce blood pressure.

Increased physical activity helps lower blood pressure and control weight. Alcohol consumption has also been associated with high blood pressure. Another reason to reduce salt intake is the fact that high salt intakes may increase the amount of calcium excreted in the urine and, therefore, increase the body's need for calcium.

Sodium has an important role in the body. However, most Americans consume more sodium than is needed. Individuals should try not to consume more than 2,400 mg of sodium per day (2,400 mg sodium is contained in 6 grams of salt). In household measures, one level teaspoon of salt provides about 2,300 milligrams of sodium. Most people consume more than this amount.

Advice for Today

Fresh fruits and vegetables have very little sodium. The food groups in the Pyramid include some foods high in sodium, and other foods that have very little sodium, or can be prepared in ways that add flavor without adding salt. Use herbs and spices to flavor food. Use the Nutrition Facts Label to identify sodium content and choose forms of foods that you frequently consume that are lower in sodium and salt.

There is no way at present to tell who might develop high blood pressure from eating too much sodium. However, consuming less salt or sodium is not harmful and can be recommended for the healthy normal adult.

If You Drink Alcoholic Beverages, Do So in Moderation

Alcoholic beverages supply calories but few or no nutrients. The alcohol in these beverages has effects that are harmful when consumed in excess. These effects of alcohol may alter judgement and can lead to dependency and a great many other serious health problems.

Current evidence suggests that moderate drinking is associated with a lower risk for coronary heart disease in some individuals. However, higher levels of alcohol intake raise the risk for high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, certain cancers, accidents, violence, suicides, birth defects, and overall mortality (deaths). Heavy drinkers are at risk of malnutrition because alcohol contains calories that may substitute for those in more nutritious foods.

Some people should not drink alcoholic beverages at all. They include: children and adolescents; those who cannot restrict their drinking to moderate levels; women who are trying to conceive or who are pregnant; individuals who plan to drive or take part in activities that require attention or skill; and individuals using prescription and over-the-counter medications.

Advice for Today

If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation, with meals, and when consumption does not put you or others at risk.

What is moderate drinking?

Women: No more than 1 drink a day

Men: No more than 2 drinks a day

Count as a drink:

- 12 ounces of regular beer
- 5 ounces of wine
- 1 1/2 ounces of distilled spirits (80 proof)

References

Adapted from the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, Fourth Edition, USDA, USDHHS, 1995.

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