



What is a Balanced Diet?



Health



Wellness



Nutrition



Support

Introduction

A balanced diet is about eating and drinking the right amount of nutrients our body needs each day. It's about enjoying your food while at the same time being aware of what you eat to improve and support your health.

The Eatwell Guide is developed by the government to show examples of what a balanced diet should look like. However, following the Eatwell Guide is not always something we can do well for different reasons.

This booklet describes a balanced diet and the reasons for the food examples listed. This should help you make choices about your food and drink to improve your health and how you feel every day.

Remember, your own diet is not going to look exactly the same as the guidelines, but by making small changes we can eat a more balanced diet.

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The Eatwell Guide

There are 5 main food groups that make up a balanced diet:

- Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates
- Fruits and vegetables
- Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins
- Dairy and dairy alternatives
- Oil and spreads

The types of food and the portion sizes in the guide aim to help us reduce fat, sugar and salt intake and increase the amount of fibre and essential nutrients we eat. By limiting our intake of one type of food, we change how our body works - and this is not usually good for our health.

The guide is not an example of a single day. Rather, it shows us a wide range of foods that we can choose to eat over a whole week.

The meals we eat should not come from one category, but not every meal will have food from each category either. This is why we should think about a full day or week when trying to eat a balanced diet.

Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates

Carbohydrates have been given a bad name for a long time. For all the talk of 'cutting down on carbs', they are an important part of our diet and should make up to one third of our total food in a day.

Carbohydrates provide us with energy and aid concentration, and a good supply of carbohydrates for the body can prevent extra fat being stored.

Low carbohydrate diets can support successful weight loss, but this is often for short periods of time and we often find we regain weight eventually. This is because low carbohydrate diets are difficult to keep up.

Low-carb diets should only be used if you have a medical reason to do so (e.g. diabetes) and always be monitored by a health professional.

Choosing wholegrain, brown and seeded types of foods will increase the amount of fibre we eat, which is good for our gut health.

These could include potatoes, wholegrain or seeded breads, wholegrain cereal, porridge, cous cous, wheat biscuits, spaghetti, rice, whole wheat pasta, bagels and flatbreads.

Top Tip: Choose plain ingredients to cook with rather than pre-prepared meals where possible. This will reduce unwanted fat, salt and sugars from carbohydrate foods.



Fruits and vegetables

Most of us will have heard of the Importance of getting our 'five-a-day'. It's all about getting us to eat more fruits and vegetables.

Fruits and vegetables should make up at least one third of our daily intake. This is to make sure we get lots of fibre (great for our gut health) and a wide range of vitamins and minerals to keep our body healthy. Anything counts here, so try to eat as much variety as possible.

Local farm shops or fruit and veg stalls are usually better to buy from as your fruit and veg will be fresher and you'll also be supporting local businesses. Tinned and frozen vegetables are great to limit food waste and always ensure you have some fruit and veg in the house.

Choose unprocessed fruit and vegetables instead of juices or blended foods to get the most nutrients from the food you eat.

Top Tips:

- Make sure all meals and snacks have some fruits or vegetables included.
- Be as colourful as you can with your choices - this will ensure you get a wide range of nutrients.
- Ask your family what their favourites are and always keep a supply in the house. Frozen fruit and veg is a great way to prevent waste and keep the family favourites stocked up!

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

Most of us already eat enough protein, so adding more through protein shakes, protein bars and the like is not necessary. Protein is a buzz word used in marketing to sell more of certain foods because we know it's a nutrient that can be good for us.

Those who eat meat and animal products are more likely to eat too much protein. Animal products also contain more fat and saturated fat than plant-based foods. For anyone who doesn't eat meat or animal products, it's important to eat a variety of plant-based proteins.

To balance our diet, we should also try to swap meat and animal products for more plant-based food such as tofu, beans and pulses (including lentils and chickpeas), nuts and seeds.

Two portions of oily fish (e.g. mackerel or salmon) per week is also recommended.



Eating a range of foods from this category will help to limit hunger and cravings, but don't be fooled by the marketing word 'protein' written on packaged foods.

Top Tip: Pick 3 foods from this category to include in your meals and snacks every day. For example, add seeds to breakfast, have a boiled egg with lunch and enjoy meat, fish or beans with evening meal. Nuts make a great snack on the go.

Dairy and alternatives

As with proteins, those who eat animal foods and animal products can easily eat too much from this category.

Natural dairy foods are high in fat, so we need to be careful with portion sizes. Swapping to lower fat alternatives is a good choice but be careful that there aren't any unwanted added ingredients such as sugars or sweeteners.

We should aim to have two or three portions of dairy foods each day. If choosing alternatives such as oat or soy products, look for unsweetened and fortified products so you don't miss out on the essential nutrients dairy can provide.

Dairy foods do not need to be avoided and contain many nutrients that benefit our body.

Top Tip: Buying unsweetened or plain dairy foods and adding ingredients at home is a fantastic way to reduce unwanted ingredients and include better balance in your day.

Oils and Spreads

Fat is a source of essential fatty acids, which the body cannot make itself. Having some fat in our diet is therefore essential, but we need to be careful of how much we eat.

Saturated fats include butter and coconut oils. Unsaturated fats are healthier and usually come from plant sources, for example vegetable oil, rapeseed oil, olive oil and spreads made from unsaturated oils. Swapping to unsaturated fats when cooking and as spreads on sandwiches will help to reduce cholesterol levels in our blood.

Remember, all types of fat are high in energy and should be eaten in smaller amounts.



Other tips for achieving a balanced diet

Foods high in fat, salt and sugars

Foods such as crisps, sweets, chocolate, cakes, biscuits and ice cream are not needed in our diet and should be eaten less often as treats.

Snacks and drinks that are high in both fat and sugar have very little nutritional value apart from providing calories, and they have proven links to causing weight gain other health problems. If you eat these foods and drinks regularly, try to have them less often and in smaller amounts.

It's important to remember these foods can be enjoyed as an occasional snack. Our brains recognise the pleasure we get from these foods, so it is difficult to remove them completely from our diet without craving them. These foods can still be enjoyed without harm to our health if eaten less often and in smaller amounts.

Water and hydration

We should all drink 6 to 8 glasses of water every day. Our body needs water to function well and even mild dehydration can affect mood, alertness and impact on our food choices.

Water, lower-fat milk and sugar-free drinks including tea and coffee all count. Limit fruit juice and smoothies to one small glass a day.

Sugary drinks are one of the main reasons for high sugar diets in children and adults in the UK. Swap sugary soft drinks for diet, sugar-free or no added sugar varieties to reduce sugar intake, but ideally switch to water if you can.

Try adding fruit or herbs to plain water to add flavour. Children often love trying this out! Frozen lemon and lime slices and other fruits work well.

Summary

Many of the foods in this guide are natural foods with minimal or no factory processing, and this is often the basis of all the diets we read about.

By following the Eatwell Guide examples, you can choose the foods you want (including snacks and treats) and feel in control of your diet.

Here are some top tips to help guide you towards a healthier balanced diet:

- Every type of food has a purpose, both for your body and your mind.
- Do not think of food as good or bad. Think about quality of the food based on how natural it is and how many nutrients it has.
- Diets that cut out entire food groups can harm our health by reducing the amount of nutrients we eat. They should always be avoided unless medically advised.

- Try to cook meals from basic ingredients and limit the processed ingredients you use.
- Try to replace meat with beans and pulses once or twice a week.
- Remember that sugary and fatty foods do not benefit our bodies or health. They can be enjoyed as a treat every now and then.
- Unless you have a specific medical or dietary need, a balanced diet should provide all the necessary vitamins and minerals that your body needs.
- If you have a medical condition, intolerances, or allergies, you should always speak to a medical professional for support in altering your diet.
- And finally... Don't try to achieve a 'perfect diet'. We all eat differently and enjoy different things. Balance the food groups to suit you and your family's need.

Where to get more Information

You can read about the Eatwell Guide in more detail by visiting <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide/Booklet>.

The Eatwell Guide is also available in different formats to support culturally appropriate diets for people living in the UK. These are available for:

- African and Caribbean - <https://mynutriweb.com/the-african-and-caribbean-eatwell-guide/>
- Southeast Asian - <https://mynutriweb.com/the-south-asian-eatwell-guide/>
- Vegetarian - <https://vegsoc.org/eating-veggie/nutritional-advice/>
- Vegan - <https://www.vegansociety.com/resources/downloads/vegan-eatwell-guide>

If you would like to discuss the information in this booklet or require further support and information, please get in touch on the information below.

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