



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
FAQ130  
WOMEN'S HEALTH

## Healthy Eating

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### Why is it important to eat a healthy diet?

Your body needs a balanced supply of **nutrients** to grow, replace worn-out tissue, and provide energy. Not getting enough of these important nutrients can affect your health. However, eating too much food and excess **calories** can lead to health problems.

## How can obesity be harmful to my body?

**Obesity** increases the risk of **cardiovascular disease**, **diabetes**, high blood pressure, and certain types of cancer, including breast cancer, colon cancer, and cancer of the **uterus**. Obesity also is associated with infertility (see [FAQ064 Weight Control: Eating Right and Keeping Fit](#)).

## How can I find a healthy way to eat?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's web site "MyPlate" ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)) offers a free diet-tracking program called "SuperTracker" that takes into account your age, sex, height, weight, and physical activity and gives the amount of food you should have each day from each of the following five food groups:

1. Grains
2. Fruits
3. Vegetables
4. Protein foods
5. Dairy foods

## What is a balanced diet?

A balanced diet should include a combination of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats.

## Why is protein important to my body?

Protein provides the nutrients your body needs to grow and repair muscles and other tissues.

## What foods are good sources of protein?

Protein is found in the following foods:

- Beef, pork, and fish
- Poultry
- Eggs and dairy products
- Beans and peas
- Nuts and seeds

## How can I get enough protein if I am a vegetarian?

For vegetarians, protein can be found in nuts, seeds, nut butters, and soy products such as tempeh and tofu. Vegetarians who include dairy products in their diets also can get needed protein from milk and eggs.

## Why is it important to include fat in my diet?

Some types of fats, called omega-3 fatty acids, play an important role in brain development. Fats also are essential to the function of the **immune system**, aid in blood clotting, and help your body use vitamins A, D, E, and K.

## Do all types of fats have health benefits?

Some have health benefits, while others do not. You should be aware of the different types of fat in your diet:

- Saturated fats come mainly from meat and dairy products. They tend to be solid when chilled.
- Unsaturated fats tend to be liquid and come mostly from plants and vegetables.
- Trans fats are unsaturated fats that have been chemically processed to be solid at room temperature.

## What type of fat is best for me?

Most of the fat that you eat should be in the form of unsaturated fat from plant oils.

## How can too much fat be bad for me?

Too much saturated fat and trans fat in your diet can lead to abnormal **cholesterol** levels, which can increase your risk of cardiovascular disease. Excess body fat can lead to several health problems, including diabetes, heart disease, and joint problems.

## How can I decrease the amount of fat that I eat?

You also can decrease your fat intake by changing the way you prepare foods:

- Broil, bake, poach, or steam your food instead of frying or sauteing it.
- Skim liquid fat from soups.
- Trim all fat from meats.
- Remove skin from poultry.

## How does my body use carbohydrates?

All carbohydrates are broken down into **glucose**, the body's main fuel that powers all of its activities.

## What are the types of carbohydrates?

There are two types of carbohydrates: simple carbohydrates and complex carbohydrates.

## What are simple carbohydrates?

Simple carbohydrates are found in naturally sweet foods like fruits and also can be added to foods in the form of table sugar, honey, and syrup. They provide a quick energy boost because they are digested and absorbed rapidly.

## Why is it important to limit my intake of simple carbohydrates?

Simple carbohydrates often are high in calories. It is best to avoid sugary drinks and foods with added sugar.

## What are complex carbohydrates?

Complex carbohydrates are found in bread, rice, pasta, some fruits, and starchy vegetables such as potatoes and corn. Complex carbohydrates also include dietary fiber. Complex carbohydrates provide longer-lasting energy than simple carbohydrates because it takes your body longer to process them.

## What is dietary fiber?

Dietary fiber is found in plant foods. It is the part of the plant that your body cannot digest. Fiber passes relatively unchanged through your digestive system. It can help prevent constipation by adding bulk to the stool, making it easier to pass. Fiber also helps maintain a stable blood glucose level because it passes slowly through the digestive tract. Eating low-glycemic foods can help you feel full and reduce the feeling of hunger, which can aid in weight loss. Low-glycemic foods also may help reduce cholesterol levels and prevent diabetes.

## Which foods are good sources of dietary fiber?

The following foods are good sources of dietary fiber:

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Whole-grain products

## Why is calcium important in my diet?

Calcium is needed for healthy bones.

## What are good sources of calcium?

Skim milk and other dairy foods, such as yogurt and cheese, are high in calcium. Non-dairy sources of calcium include the following:

- Dark greens
- Soybeans and some soy products
- Certain canned fish and seafood
- Cereals and juices with added calcium

## Why is vitamin D important in my diet?

Vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium.

## What are good sources of vitamin D?

Good sources are milk fortified with vitamin D and fish that have a lot of unsaturated fat, such as salmon. Exposure to sunlight also converts a chemical in the skin to vitamin D.

## Why is iron important in my diet?

Iron is needed to make new red blood cells. The most common form of **anemia** is caused by a lack of iron. Anemia may make you feel tired and weak.

## What are good sources of iron?

One serving of most breakfast cereals with added iron should provide enough of this daily requirement. Other foods that are good sources of iron include the following:

- Spinach
- Beans (soybeans, white beans, lentils, kidney beans, chick peas)
- Clams and oysters
- Meats (beef, duck, lamb)
- Organ meats (liver, giblets)

It helps to eat foods rich in vitamin C, like oranges and tomatoes, at the same meal with an iron-rich food. Vitamin C helps your body use iron better.

### Why is folic acid important in my diet?

Folic acid is a B vitamin that also is known as folate. Folic acid improves your overall health and also helps reduce the risk of having a baby with a **neural tube defect**.

### Where can I find the folic acid I need in my diet?

Folic acid is added to certain foods (breads, cereal, pasta, rice, and flour) and is found in leafy dark-green vegetables, citrus fruits, and beans. It may be hard to get all of the folic acid you need from food sources alone. For this reason, it is recommended that all women of childbearing age take a daily supplement containing 400 micrograms of folic acid.

### What should I know about sodium?

Sodium is linked to high blood pressure. Sodium should be used in small amounts—about 2,300 mg, or about one teaspoon of table salt, a day. If you are older than 50 years, African American, or have diabetes, high blood pressure, or kidney disease, you should have no more than 1,500 mg a day.

### Glossary

**Anemia:** Abnormally low levels of blood or red blood cells in the bloodstream. Most cases are caused by iron deficiency, or lack of iron.

**Calories:** Units of heat used to express the fuel or energy value of food.

**Cardiovascular Disease:** Disease of the heart and blood vessels.

**Cholesterol:** A natural substance that serves as a building block for cells and hormones and helps to carry fat through the blood vessels for use or storage in other parts of the body.

**Diabetes:** A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

**Glucose:** A sugar that is present in the blood and is the body's main source of fuel.

**Immune System:** The body's natural defense system against foreign substances and invading organisms, such as bacteria that cause disease.

**Neural Tube Defect:** A birth defect that results from incomplete development of the brain, spinal cord, or their coverings.

**Nutrients:** Nourishing substances supplied through food, such as vitamins and minerals.

**Obesity:** A condition characterized by excessive body fat.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

### If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

**FAQ130:** Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to the institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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