

Healthy Living

A balanced diet is a cornerstone of health. Women, like men, should enjoy a variety of healthful foods from all of the food groups, including whole grains, fruits, vegetables, healthy fats, low-fat or fat-free dairy and lean protein. But women also have special nutrient needs, and, during each stage of a woman's life, these needs change.

Eating Right

Nutrient-rich foods provide energy for women's busy lives and help to reduce the risk of disease. A healthy eating plan regularly includes:

- At least three ounce equivalents of whole grains such as whole-grain bread, whole-wheat cereal flakes, whole-wheat pasta, brown rice or oats.
- Three servings of low-fat or fat-free dairy products including milk, yogurt or cheese; or calcium-fortified plant-based alternatives.
- Five to five-and-a-half ounce equivalents of protein such as lean meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds.
- Two cups of fruits — fresh, frozen or canned without added sugar.
- Two-and-a-half cups of colorful vegetables — fresh, frozen or canned without added salt.

Iron-rich Foods

Iron is one of the keys to good health and energy levels in women prior to menopause. Foods that provide iron include red meat, chicken, turkey, fish, spinach, beans, lentils and some fortified ready-to-eat cereals.

Plant-based sources of iron are more easily absorbed by your body when eaten with vitamin C-rich foods. So eat fortified cereal with strawberries on top, spinach salad with orange slices or add tomatoes to lentil soup.

Folate (and Folic Acid) During the Reproductive Years

When women reach childbearing age, they need to eat enough folate (or folic acid) to help decrease the risk of birth defects. The requirement for women who are not pregnant is 400 micrograms (mcg) per day.

Including adequate amounts of foods that naturally contain folate, such as citrus fruits, leafy greens, beans and peas, will help increase your intake of this B vitamin. There also are many foods that are fortified with folic acid, such as breakfast cereals, some rices and breads. Eating a variety of foods is recommended to help meet nutrient needs, but a dietary supplement with folic acid also may be necessary. This is especially true for women who are pregnant or breast-feeding, since their daily need for folate is higher, 600 mcg and 500 mcg per day, respectively. Be sure to check with your physician or a registered dietitian nutritionist before taking any supplements.

Daily Calcium and Vitamin D Requirements

For healthy bones and teeth, women need to eat a variety of calcium-rich foods every day. Calcium keeps bones strong and helps to reduce the risk for osteoporosis, a bone disease in which the bones become weak and break easily. Some calcium-rich foods include low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt and cheese, sardines, and calcium-fortified foods including plant-based milk alternatives, juices and cereals. Adequate amounts of vitamin D also are important, and the need for both calcium and vitamin D increases as women get older. Good sources of vitamin D include fatty fish, such as salmon, eggs and fortified foods and beverages, such as milk, plant-based milk alternatives, some yogurts and juices.

Foods and Beverages to Limit

Women should avoid excess added sugars, saturated fat.

- Limit sweetened beverages, including regular soft drinks, candy, cookies, pastries and other desserts.

- Eat fewer foods that are high in saturated fat. Opt for low-fat or fat-free dairy products and lean proteins instead of their full-fat counterparts. Cook with olive oil instead of butter and coconut oil. Incorporate more plant-based protein foods, such as beans, lentils into your diet.

Balancing Calories with Activity

Since women typically have less muscle, more body fat and are smaller than men, they need fewer calories to maintain a healthy body weight and activity level. Women who are more physically active may require more calories.

Physical activity is an important part of a woman's health. Regular activity helps with muscle strength, balance, flexibility and stress management.

As with any part of raising children, no one does a perfect job with nutrition. As a parent, grandparent or adult caregiver, you can help to raise healthy eaters during these critical years by doing your best to:

- Serve regular, balanced meals and snacks with a variety of nutrient-rich foods.
- Provide calm, pleasant meal times where adults and children can talk together.
- Remove distractions such as television, phones and tablets so that your attention is on each other.
- Allow children to use their internal signals to decide how much and what to eat from the foods you set out for each meal.
- Explore a variety of flavors and foods from different cultures and cuisines.
- Share an appreciation for healthful food, lovingly prepared and shared with others.
- Make simple food safety, such as washing hands, part of every eating occasion.

- Teach basic skills for making positive food choices away from home.
- Find credible food and nutrition resources when you don't know the answer.

While this may seem like an intimidating to-do list, two family habits go a long way to making all this happen: regular family meals and involving kids in nutrition from the ground up.

Make Family Meal Times a Priority

Sometimes a very simple act can have important, long-lasting benefits. According to parenting and health experts, that is exactly the case with family meal times. Eating and talking together helps to:

- Foster family unity
- Prevent behavior problems at home and school
- Enhance academic success
- Improve nutrition
- Promote healthy weight for kids

With that impressive list of benefits, it's worth making the time and effort to enjoy more family meal times each week. Look for easy ways to add just one family meal to the schedule. If evenings seem too hectic for family dinners, set aside time for a weekend breakfast or lunch. After a month or two of this new pattern, you can add another family meal each week. Before you know it, you will be eating together on most days.

Start by Assessing Your Food Choices and Lifestyle

Keep track of what you eat and drink and how much physical activity you get so you can identify behaviors you would like to change.

One Large Goal can Seem Overwhelming

Break big goals into smaller, more specific goals and include a list of realistic changes in your daily routine to achieve these specific goals. For instance, divide big and vague goals like "I will eat better" into smaller, more specific goals like "I will eat one more piece of fruit per day." Remember, while your goals should be challenging, they should also be reachable.

Make Sure the Goals You Set are Measurable

The goals must provide answers to "How much?" or "How many?" so you can easily review and track your progress. Evaluate your progress every week or two, and update your plan based upon your current progress or circumstances. Make sure you are giving yourself enough time to achieve each smaller goal so you are not discouraged if you haven't met them.

Seek Help from a Qualified Health Professional

A registered dietitian nutritionist is your best source of reliable and up-to-date food and nutrition information.

www.eatright.org