

# Healthy eating

By Eamonn Brady (MPSI)

Even if you feel you do not need to lose weight, it is important to be aware that food choices can have a long-term impact on your health. There is good evidence that eating a healthy diet can reduce your risk of illnesses such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis and cancer (particularly bowel cancer).

**A balanced diet:** No single kind of food contains all the nutrients and fibre you need, so it's important to eat a range of foods. There are five main food groups:

- **starchy foods**
- **fruit and vegetables**
- **dairy foods**
- **meat, fish and other non-dairy sources of protein (such as beans)**
- **fats and sugar**

**Starchy foods:** Most of the carbohydrate in your diet should come from starchy foods (complex carbohydrates). These include bread, cereals, potatoes, pasta and rice. Starchy foods tend to be bulky, so they fill you up which is very useful if you tend to get hunger pangs between your meals. Wholegrain varieties can be particularly rich in nutrients and fibre, and hence are a healthier option than white varieties. Examples include wholegrain rice, wholemeal bread, porridge oats and whole-wheat pasta. If you decide to increase the amount of fibre you eat you need to drink more water to help it flow through your digestive system with ease.

**Fruit and vegetables:** Fruit and vegetables are good sources of many nutrients including vitamins, minerals and fibre. You should aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. Scientific studies have shown that people who eat a lot of fruit and vegetables may have a lower risk of getting illnesses, such as heart disease and some cancers. It doesn't matter whether they're fresh, tinned, frozen, cooked, juiced or dried.

**Dairy foods** Milk and dairy products such as cheese and yogurt are important sources of calcium, protein and vitamins. Choose lower-fat options such as semi-skimmed or skimmed milk, low-fat yogurts and cheeses (such as Edam). There's exactly the same amount of calcium in skimmed milk, low fat yoghurt and reduced-fat cheese as the whole fat versions. However, children under the age of two need the full-fat versions to help them grow.

Some dairy foods, such as butter and cream, should be eaten in much smaller amounts because of their high fat content, particularly saturated fats.

**Meat, fish, eggs and alternatives:** Red meat, poultry, fish (fresh, frozen or tinned), beans and pulses, eggs and nuts are all important non-dairy sources of protein. It is recommended that 15% of your diet is protein. It is no use bingeing on protein either as your body does not store it. When preparing meat and poultry, cut off any extra fat and skin and don't add butter or oil when cooking it (or only use small amounts); consider grilling, baking or poaching meat, fish and poultry rather than frying it. Also try to limit amounts of processed meat (such as sausages and meat pies) as they often contain a lot of fat, and also salt. It's recommended that you eat two portions of fish per week (one portion is about 140g), of which one should be oily. This is because of its high content of long chain omega 3 fatty acids. These fatty acids have a protective effect on your heart. Omega 3 fatty acids are primarily found in oily fish such as salmon, fresh tuna, mackerel, herring, sardines and pilchards.

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**Fats and sugar:** Butter, mayonnaise, crisps, cakes and puddings are examples of foods which are high in fat (particularly saturated fats) and should only be eaten in small amounts. Look out for low-fat options of these foods, which may be slightly healthier but should still be eaten in small amounts. A certain amount of fat is essential for good health but if you eat too much of it, you're more likely to become overweight and may be at an increased risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

However, it's not only the total amount of fat in our diet that influences your health but also the quality of fat. Some types of fat have been shown to be very good for you, for example the long chain omega 3 fatty acids in oily fish, which help to protect against heart disease. It is important to have more polyunsaturated fat than saturated fat in the diet.

Foods high in refined sugar such as table sugar, sugary drinks and snacks provide "empty calories". This means that these foods give you energy but have low nutritional value. Frequently eating sugary foods also contributes to tooth decay and gum disease, so try to limit your refined sugar intake.

**Vitamins and minerals:** Most people should get enough vitamins and minerals from a balanced diet but there are a few exceptions where vitamin and mineral supplements are recommended. This includes children aged between six months and five years and women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant. High doses of some vitamins may have damaging effects on your health. For example, too much vitamin A and D can be toxic to the liver.

**Times of stress:** Deficiency in the B vitamins is associated with nerve related conditions such as stress, anxiety, depression and irritability. The B vitamins keep the central nervous system functioning well so are important in fighting stress. Anti oxidant vitamins are also important during periods of stress. The body produces more free radicals during stress which affect our immune system. Anti oxidant vitamins such as vitamin C and E prevent free radical damage to the body so are also important during stress. Fruit and vegetables, whole grains, nuts and beans are good sources of B vitamins and antioxidants. If you feel you need an extra boost of B vitamins during a stressful period,

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