

# WHAT IS HEALTHY EATING?

## How to Follow All that Advice You Hear

(Source: NIH News in Health)

You want to live longer. You want to feel healthy, energetic and vigorous as you age. Your doctor says you should start eating better. You've heard that before, of course, but do you know what it really means?

Research is teaching us more about what a healthy diet is. And studies show that healthier eating habits may help lower your risk for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer and many other health problems. The sooner you improve your eating, the better off you'll be. So start reaping the rewards of this research and learn how to eat healthier now.

"In general Americans are not eating enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and eating too much fat and salt," says Dr. Susan Z. Yanovski, director of NIH's Obesity and Eating Disorders Program. "There's a lot of room for improvement in the American diet."

Begin, Yanovski advises, by eating more fruits and vegetables. They naturally contain vitamins, minerals and fiber that help protect you from disease. Compared with people who eat only small amounts of fruits and vegetables, those who eat more have a reduced risk of cancers, stroke and other cardiovascular diseases.

Fruits and vegetables with different colors tend to have different levels of important nutrients, such as folate, potassium and vitamins A and C. So when you go to the grocery store, walk down the produce aisle and fill your cart or basket with a variety of colors.

Next, get into the habit of eating more whole grains. Foods with whole grains have fiber, which aids in digestion, and are rich in important nutrients. You can easily add whole grains to your diet by choosing breads and cereals made with whole grains. But be careful of products with claims like, "now with whole grain." Some cereals marketed for children, for example, may contain whole grain, but not much—and they might have way too much sugar.

"You have to become a label reader," Yanovski says. "Look on the label, and one of the first few ingredients should say something like 'whole wheat' or 'whole grain.' It should be one of the first ingredients, and it should have the word 'whole' in it."

In fact, Nutrition Facts labels have lots of information to help you become a healthier eater. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has a website to teach you to use and understand labels at <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html>.

One thing to look for on food labels is calcium, a particularly important nutrient for young people who are still growing and building their bones. Most Americans don't get enough calcium to grow or maintain strong bones. For instance, studies show that fewer than 1 in 10 girls and only 1 in 4 boys ages 9 to 13 are getting enough calcium.

To get more calcium into your diet, choose low-fat or nonfat dairy products like milk, cheese and yogurt. Other good sources of calcium are tofu (check the label for added calcium), calcium-fortified juices, soy- or rice-based beverages with added calcium (milk substitutes) and calcium-fortified cereals and breads.

Nutrition labels can also help you avoid the things we eat too much of. Too much saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol can raise your blood cholesterol, a risk factor for heart disease. Too much salt (which appears on the label as "sodium") can contribute to high blood pressure, another risk factor for heart disease and stroke. Too much sugar adds empty calories and helps contribute to obesity.

Sometimes, unfortunately, it's not easy to find healthy foods. Karen Donato, coordinator of NIH's Obesity Education Initiative, says, "Feeling pressed for time, many people turn to prepared food, which can be high in saturated fat, sodium and calories—and often come super-sized. But you can have convenience and good health by making wise choices."

When you go to restaurants, ask for their healthier dishes. Many restaurants now highlight them in the menu. When you buy prepared foods at the store, check the labels for foods that are lower in sodium, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and calories.

Yanovski says, "The good news is that there are a lot of good choices out there. The food industry has been making it easier by making packages with smaller portions and healthier products for people who don't have a lot of time to prepare."

You can do the same in your home. Make healthy eating convenient, and your family will be more likely to choose healthier foods. Start with small changes, like giving your kids whole wheat bread, which has more whole grain than traditional white bread. Have more fruit sitting out on the table—and nuts, if weight control isn't a problem for your family. Make healthier foods easier to get to than less healthful foods.

For meals, add more vegetables to your favorite dishes. Choose lean meats, poultry and fish. Add more beans to the mix.

Don't wait any longer. Start your family eating healthier now. If you have children, set a good example. Help them learn healthy eating habits early to

prevent health problems later in life. NIH has a wealth of information to help you and your family eat better and stay healthier, including recipe books, an online menu planner and many other tools and publications to help you choose the right foods and portions. Talk to your doctor about fine-tuning your diets to your bodies' needs.

Finally, don't forget that physical activity is the other key to healthier living. Eating a healthy diet and getting enough physical activity helps you feel well as you get older. Read the next story in this issue for tips on how to get more active.

### **Wise Choices**

#### **Tips for Eating Right**

Here are some simple things you can do to eat better:

- Start every day with a healthy breakfast.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables.
- Choose whole grains like 100% whole wheat bread, oatmeal or brown rice instead of refined grains like white bread and rice.
- Choose low-fat or nonfat milk, cheese and yogurt.
- Don't let sugary soda or other sweets crowd out healthy foods and beverages.
- Go easy on mayonnaise, creamy sauces and added butter.
- When you eat out, consider a salad with grilled chicken and fat-free or low-fat dressing. Even take-out and high-fat foods can be part of a balanced diet if you don't eat them every day and don't eat too much of them. For example, eat only a child's order of french fries or one slice of pizza.
- Watch how much you eat. Even if you eat a healthy mix of foods, if you weigh too much you're at a higher risk for diabetes, heart disease and other health problems. Value-size servings aren't a bargain if you're eating more than your body needs.
- Remember that food with labels that say "low-fat," "reduced fat" or "light" aren't necessarily low in calories. Fat-free or low-fat muffins or desserts can have even more sugar than the full fat versions.
- Don't eat in front of the TV or in other situations out of habit. Instead of reaching for that cookie, do something else like call a friend or take a walk.
- Be aware of when, where and why you eat, and try to eat balanced meals throughout the day.