

What is Healthy Eating? The Meaning of a Well-Balanced Diet

By definition, a well balanced diet is one that on a regular basis includes foods that meet our body's requirements for the wide variety of nutrients needed to stay healthy. But that doesn't mean you need to swear off all "junk food," become a vegetarian and cook everything from scratch. Healthy eating is not an all-or-nothing proposition. It's what you eat most of the time that affects your health most. That means no need for lists of "forbidden foods" that you need to learn to live without. That's self-defeating "diet talk" that we know has a slim chance of lasting long term!

But given the state of our national health, it's clear that most people's day-to-day eating habits are in sore need of a tune-up. Too much processed, high fat food, along with too little physical activity, are raising our rates of obesity, heart disease and diabetes, starting younger in life than ever before. On the other hand, reams of research tell us that many of these health problems are avoidable by eating a well-balanced diet and exercising regularly. And the earlier in life you begin, the better.

So where's the middle ground? It's helpful to think about healthy eating according to the "80-20" rule. If 80% of the time you're doing a pretty good job of eating a healthful diet, what you do 20% of the time doesn't matter so much. In other words, no one's health will completely unravel if they occasionally eat pizza at 2 a.m. But if on a regular basis you're skipping meals, grabbing take-out on the fly, and rarely working out, a lifestyle shake-up is in order.

What exactly does a well balanced diet look like?

This may be a particularly tough question for you if you didn't grow up in a house where healthy habits were emphasized. Without knowledge of the basics, the tendency is to mistrust your judgment and see way too many foods as "bad." Keep in mind that healthy eating isn't just about limiting the stuff that's not so good for you – it's also about going out of your way to eat nutritious foods. Here are some general guidelines for making healthy food choices:

Aim for more fruits and vegetables. Studies show that eating more vegetables and fruits at meals and snacks helps displace higher calorie – and often less nutritious – foods, without leaving you feeling hungry. They're also packed with vitamins, minerals, fiber and disease-fighting plant nutrients called phytochemicals.

Include low fat protein foods – like lean meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, reduced fat dairy foods, beans, soy foods, nuts and seeds – with meals and snacks whenever possible. These foods will help you meet your daily protein requirements (50 grams per day for women, 63 grams for men), and provide many important vitamins and minerals. Also, protein foods are more filling than carbohydrates and will help you stay feeling full longer throughout the day.

Trim the fat. Most people – particularly those who eat out a lot – eat far more fat than is healthy. Limit foods that are fried, prepared with a cream or cheese sauce, or have lots of added butter or oil.

Opt for whole grains whenever possible. Look for whole grain breads, fiber-containing cereals, brown rice and other “brown” grain foods.

Limit your access to “junk foods.” You greatly increase your odds of overindulging if they’re too easily available.

Don’t skip meals. Give yourself every opportunity to get the good stuff in. Skipping meals during the day also often leads to overeating at night, which is not a healthy habit, particularly for those watching their weight.

Above all, to make all this happen, it’s important to “set the stage” to up the odds good eating to occur. That involves a little planning so that good food is available, and carving out time, a few times a day, to sit down and eat healthful foods.