

What is diet?

Diet includes all the food that is eaten during a certain time period. However, the term is often used by medical professionals to refer to a dietary regimen to treat a specific condition or symptoms. This may include 'weight loss diet' but that is beyond the scope of this factsheet. In this factsheet, diet refers to the food eaten in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle. A healthy lifestyle includes a healthy diet, regular exercise, not smoking and limiting alcohol intake.

Why is a healthy diet important?

Good nutrition is essential to obtain the nutrients to keep the body healthy as well as avoiding substances that may be harmful. It complements the effect of exercise and provides the calories needed to undertake exertion to keep muscles and the heart healthy. When a healthy diet and regular exercise are combined, an ideal weight can be reached and maintained. This in turn can help prevent or reduce the risk of developing certain long-term diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and strokes. Additionally, it may reduce the risk of developing certain cancers.

It is important to note that diet advice may differ between certain groups of people, such as those with specific dietary requirements, certain health problems and pregnant women.

What is a healthy diet?

A healthy diet means a balanced diet. It involves eating a mixture of different foods from many different food groups, in the correct proportion. The different food groups include: *starchy* (bread, rice, pasta, potatoes and some vegetables), *sweet* (fruit and some vegetables), *protein* (meat, fish, eggs, nuts, beans and pulses), *dairy* (milk, cheese and yogurt) and *fatty* (oils and nuts) foods. One single food group cannot provide everything needed for good health.

Starchy food and fruit and vegetables should make up the bulk of meals. These contain the most *fibre*, which is an important part of a healthy diet. Starchy foods should make up one third of intake. It is important to note that higher-fibre carbohydrates, such as wholegrain bread or wholegrain rice, are healthier than white bread or white rice, as they have a lower glycaemic index. Glycaemic index is a measure of the rate at which certain foods cause blood sugar to rise after they have been eaten. A high glycaemic index food (sweets, dairy) releases a lot of sugar quickly which your body has to use up or else it gets stored unhealthily as fat.

A certain amount of protein is needed, and can be obtained from many different sources. However, protein should be eaten in moderation, and be aware that some meats are high in fat as well as the protein they provide. Milk and dairy foods provide calcium for healthy bones and teeth, and it is recommended to have about three servings a day from this food group. Only a small proportion of foods should be made up of fatty and sugary foods.

To maintain a healthy diet and lifestyle, in addition to eating the correct foods, it is also important to be aware of other factors. These include:

- Maintaining fluid intake at around 2 litres per day and ensuring plenty of that is water.
- Monitoring portion sizes. It can be easy to get in the habit of large portion sizes. If this is a problem, consider buying smaller plates, as this encourages smaller portion sizes. A rule of *thumb* for a meal is a *fist*-sized portion of carbohydrate and *palm*-sized portion of protein.
- Minimising fizzy or sugary drinks
- Limiting alcohol intake to 14 units for women and 21 units for men, per week
- Avoiding or reducing intake of certain foods such sweets, cakes, crisps, chocolate, processed meats and 'ready meals'
- Avoiding extra sugar added to drinks
- Not adding salt to food, and aim for less than 6 grams per day
- Eating *at least* 5 portions of fruit and/or vegetables per day
- Eating at least two portions of oily fish per week
- Replacing saturated fat (solid at room temperature) with polyunsaturated fat (liquid at room

temperature)

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Who may need specific diets?

Patients who are diabetic may need specific diets which are low in fat, salt and sugar, high in fibre and contain lots of fruit and vegetables. Patients who have Coeliac disease require a diet which is completely gluten free. This means avoiding any food containing gluten (wheat, barley or rye). Foods containing this include pasta, bread and some cereals.

These are examples of medical conditions requiring specific diets, and do not apply to all. If you have any of these conditions, or a medical condition that you are not sure needs a specific diet or not, please contact your doctor for further advice.

Food monitoring – how and why?

Food intake can be monitored using food diaries. Every day after eating, it can be useful to write down what has been eaten, how much was eaten and what time it was eaten. *Make sure any snack and all drinks are included.* It may be useful to make a pre-made template where these details can be added, and use paper or electronic forms, whichever suits individual lifestyles.

Keeping a food diary can instantly raise awareness of our dietary patterns: how much we eat, what and when. By reviewing the food diary, areas where changes can be made may be identified. These changes may then promote a healthier diet, healthier lifestyle and weight loss if needed. Some people find food diaries useful to identify foods which may be causing an upset stomach, nausea, heartburn or other symptoms. In turn, it can also be useful for doctors to help try and establish a cause of symptoms (if they are diet related).

What is the impact of a poor diet?

A poor diet is one which does not contain the correct balance of certain food groups or one where meals are skipped. Too much of any one food group can be unhealthy. Most importantly, diets that are high in fatty or sugary foods are particularly unhealthy. Poor diet can lead to weight gain, and in combination can lead to increased risk of developing certain long-term diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and strokes. Other body systems can be affected including the kidneys and the liver. Any of these health conditions can lead to other complications, which can eventually result in a decreased life expectancy.

Choosing the correct diet

It is important to ensure a diet is tailored to individual needs, with professional input and advice. Following a diet found on the internet, or a diet without any evidence can be dangerous. They can lead to malnutrition and health problems in the long term. If weight loss is desired, speak to a doctor or seek professional advice from a dietitian before starting a diet.

For more information about research in this area please contact Core.

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