

Top Questions About Nutrition and Women

Healthy eating is a way of eating that improves your health, helps prevent disease, and gives you energy. It means eating fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy types of protein, fat, and dairy, and not eating or drinking too many calories for your body type. It also means not eating a lot of food with added sugars, saturated and trans fats, and sodium (salt). Healthy eating also means that you usually get nutrients from food rather than from vitamins or other supplements. Some women might need vitamins, minerals, or other supplements at certain times in life, such as before or during pregnancy. Some vegan and vegetarian women might need specific vitamins that are easier to get from animal products than plant sources, such as vitamin B-12.

Q: What does healthy eating look like?

A: Healthy eating means choosing different types of healthy food from all of the food groups (fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy, and proteins), most of the time, in the correct amounts for you. Fill your plate with foods from the five food groups at each meal. Half of your plate should be fruits or vegetables. Most women do not get enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains, seafood, fiber, or healthy fats, such as olive oil or canola oil. Most of us don't need complicated calorie counting programs or special recipes for healthy eating. Healthy eating also means not eating a lot of foods with added sugar, sodium (salt), and saturated and trans fats.

Q: How do women's nutritional needs change throughout life?

A: Women's nutritional needs change as our bodies change during different stages of our lives.

- **During the teen years.** Girls ages 9 to 18 need more calcium and vitamin D to build strong bones and help prevent osteoporosis later in life. Girls need 1,300 milligrams (mg) of calcium and 600 international units (IU) of vitamin D every day. Girls ages 14 to 18 also need more iron.
- **Young adults.** Teen girls and young women usually need more calories than when they were younger, to support their growing and developing bodies. After about age 25, a woman's resting metabolism (the number of calories her body needs to sustain itself at rest) goes down.
- **Before and during pregnancy.** You need more of certain nutrients than usual to support your health and your baby's development. These nutrients include protein, calcium, iron, and folic acid. Many doctors, nurses, and midwives recommend prenatal vitamins or a folic acid supplement during this time.
- **During breastfeeding.** Continue eating healthy foods while breastfeeding. You may also need to drink more water. Nursing mothers may need about 13 cups of water a day. Try drinking a glass of water every time you nurse and with each meal.
- **After menopause.** Lower levels of estrogen after menopause raise your risk for chronic diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and osteoporosis. What you eat also affects these chronic diseases. Talk to your doctor about healthy eating plans and whether you need more calcium and vitamin D to protect your bones.

Q: Are low-fat or low-carb diets safe for women?

A: Yes, these diets can be safe, but you should always talk to your doctor or nurse before limiting the amount of any specific nutrient like fat or carbs. Fats and carbs are essential, which means your body needs them to work correctly and for good health.

- **Low-carb diets** can help you lose weight, but they can also limit the amount of fiber you get each day. Most women do not get enough fiber.

- **Low-fat diets** also can help you lose weight. But the amount of weight lost is usually small.

For weight loss, what is more important is eating healthy carbs and unsaturated fats and limiting the amount of calories you take in. It helps to cut out or eat less of foods that don't have essential vitamins, minerals, or nutrients. Try one of the healthy eating plans at www.choosemyplate.gov or the top-rated Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet at www.nhlbi.nih.gov.

For more information...

For more information about nutrition, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), HHS

1-800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/nutrition

ChooseMyPlate.gov

www.choosemyplate.gov

Nutrition.gov

www.nutrition.gov

Office of Dietary Supplements, NIH, HHS

301-435-2920 • ods.od.nih.gov

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