
Eating a Balanced Diet

When your healthcare provider tells you to “eat a balanced diet,” it may sound easy and straightforward at first. But there are many conflicting opinions about what it means to eat a healthy, balanced diet.

What Is a Balanced Diet?

In functional nutrition, a “balanced diet” is one that works for your lifestyle, health concerns, and food preferences. There isn’t one diet or way of eating that works for everyone. A food plan should be tailored to you to improve your overall health and well-being. For example, a person recovering from a car accident has unique nutritional needs, which are very different from an athlete wanting to maximize their sports performance. Different combinations of protein, fat, carbohydrates, and phytonutrients can help you achieve a variety of health goals. Talk to your functional medicine provider about tailoring a food plan for you. Following are some tips to get you started.

Tips for Balancing Your Diet

Set SMART goals. A diet of whole, fresh foods may be very different from what you are used to eating. Set yourself up for success by setting small, attainable goals that help you incorporate healthy changes slowly and allow you to ease into the transition. You might start by replacing sodas with fizzy water until you’re comfortable adding another change or tackling another goal. When you’re ready, try adding a side salad to your dinner a few nights a week. Small, realistic changes over time are easier to make and are more likely to stick than a big, dramatic change made suddenly. Work toward improving your lifestyle, not eliminating everything you love to eat.

Stay hydrated. Staying hydrated helps rid the body of toxins, builds resilience to stress, enhances metabolism, and promotes satiety. Everyone should drink clean, filtered water throughout the day, but specific recommendations will depend on your weight and activity level. Those who are very active or living in warmer climates may have increased needs for hydration. Your functional medicine practitioner can provide personalized water recommendations suited to your lifestyle and health goals.

In addition to water, some other good fluid sources are broths, herbal teas, and other decaffeinated beverages. Alcohol, caffeinated beverages, and sugary beverages should be limited, as they tend to dehydrate the body and raise cortisol and blood sugar levels.

Don't skip the protein. Protein helps build and repair every part of the body. Without enough of it, you can feel run down, lethargic, and weak. Meats, eggs, poultry, and seafood are excellent protein sources, but so are certain vegetables. Good plant-based protein sources include beans and legumes, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, lentils, nuts and seeds, oats, spinach, and wild rice.

Eat plenty of healthy fats. Healthy fats will help support brain and heart health while providing your body with energy. Aim for more omega-3s (from avocados, fatty fish, nuts and seeds, etc.), and fewer omega-6s (from processed foods, salad dressings, and sauces; as well as processed vegetable oils like canola, safflower, etc.).

Opt for carbohydrates from vegetables. Many people associate carbohydrates with sweets and bread products, but these foods are not the only sources of carbohydrates. Many healthy whole foods like fruits, vegetables, beans, and lentils fall into this category, too. When balancing your diet, try to get the bulk of your carbohydrates from vegetable sources. The fiber found in vegetables helps balance blood sugar and improve digestion.

Experiment in the kitchen. Play around with different foods and cooking methods to discover what you like. Aim to try at least one new recipe per week. You might find that you like certain vegetables more or less, depending on how they are prepared. Many people discover that they enjoy vegetables they didn't like as a child. If you're not confident in your cooking skills, try taking a cooking class with a friend or browse websites dedicated to food and cooking for free tutorials. The goal is to become more comfortable with cooking. The more comfortable and enjoyable cooking is for you, the easier it will be to incorporate it into your regular routine.

Limit sugar and processed foods. Excessive intake of sugars and refined grains contributes to many chronic health issues. To help prevent or even reverse illness, limit your intake of processed foods. Examples include shelf-stable cakes and cookies, candy bars, muffins, and cereals. Read food labels carefully, and select foods with little to no added sugar. Look for foods that contain "100% whole" grain in the ingredients list (rather than "refined"). Try switching the sweetener in your morning coffee from table sugar to a natural sweetener like maple syrup or honey.

Everything in moderation. Part of eating a healthy, balanced diet includes being flexible and relaxing your rules and restrictions around food. Being too restrictive can lead to the development of disordered eating patterns. Listen to your body's cravings, and allow yourself some wiggle room. Make a point to indulge occasionally without any guilt or stress about your food choices.

Eat the rainbow. Our bodies function best when they take in nutrients from all different types and colors of whole foods. Aim to eat at least five different colors of fruits and vegetables each day. IFM's **Phytonutrient Spectrum** documents can help you plan your intake of colorful foods.