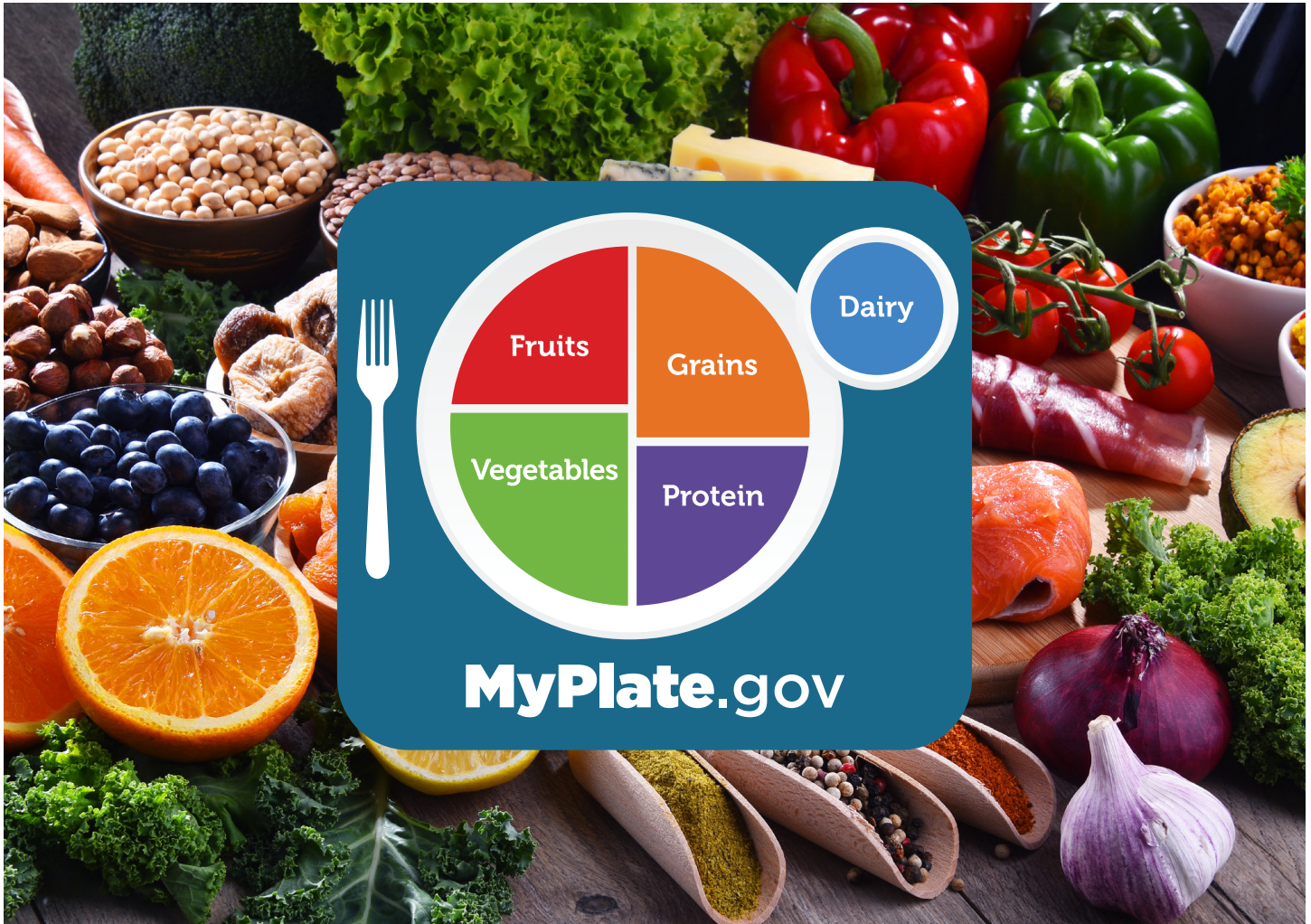


# MyPlate: Tools for Building a Balanced Plate

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Building a balanced diet is much like building a house: You must begin with a good foundation. A healthy eating foundation means including a variety of foods like fruits and vegetables, whole grains, dairy, and a mixture of lean proteins into an eating pattern.

## What is a Balanced Eating Pattern?

When building a balanced plate, choose foods that you like and that fit into your cultural, ethnic, and traditional food choices. It does not mean choosing foods you do not like or refusing to try new foods. As you build your plate, try new foods to experience new flavors and add variety and fun to your diet. Having a balanced eating pattern means using foods that are both available and affordable and enjoying them throughout the day to give your body the nutrients it needs.

A balanced eating pattern:

- Provides your body with the vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients it needs, so you have the energy to work, play, and enjoy life.
- May look different for everyone and can change depending on age, stage of life, activity level, and gender.
- Is one part of living a healthy lifestyle, in addition to quality sleep, enjoyable movement, and appropriate stress management among many other things.
- Respects cultural and financial considerations.
- Is flavorful, enjoyable, and satisfying.
- Is free from strict rules or the idea of “good” and “bad” foods.
- Doesn’t make you feel guilty for food choices made throughout the day.
- Should be celebrated and enjoyed with family, friends, and in social settings.
- Improves quality of life.

## Steps to Building a Balanced Plate

### Step 1: Fill Half Your Plate with Vegetables and Fruit

All fruits and vegetables can be used to fill half of your plate. How people prepare and eat their fruits and vegetables may look different for a variety of reasons. Some may eat with the seasons, and some may choose for convenience or cost. Regardless, for both fruits and vegetables, consider including fresh, canned, frozen, or dried varieties throughout the day and with all meals and snacks.

#### Vegetables

Vegetables provide dietary fiber, vitamins and minerals, and antioxidants. These nutrients keep the body healthy and help prevent diseases. Vegetables are naturally low in sodium, saturated fat, and sugar and are high in fiber. They help a person feel full for longer and can support proper digestion. Buying fresh vegetables when they are in season may be more accessible and affordable. Frozen and canned varieties provide the same beneficial nutrients and are often available year-round. Reach for low- or no-sodium options when possible and consider rinsing all canned vegetables before using or eating them. In general, adults should aim for three cups of vegetables each day, but that can be more or less, depending on your age, sex, activity level, and health status.

#### Tips

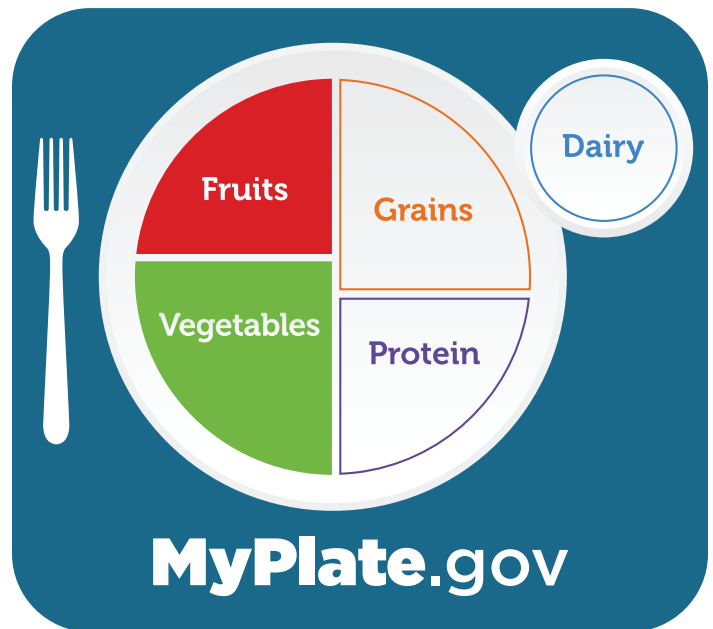
- Incorporate vegetables into breakfast with an omelet, scrambled eggs, or egg bites with your favorite veggies.
- Consider a savory breakfast bowl with your favorite whole grain and vegetables and top it with an egg.
- Add vegetables to a smoothie, with dairy, fruit, and oats blended in or topped with granola.
- Bulk up your favorite sandwich with vegetables like lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, banana peppers, mushrooms, onions, or whatever you have on hand and enjoy eating.
- Add vegetables to recipes you routinely prepare. Soups, stews, tacos, stir fry, casseroles, pizza, rice, and pasta dishes are all great dishes for adding vegetables.
- Keep a bowl of ready-to-eat vegetables in the refrigerator and use as a snack during the day.
- Try different ways of preparing your favorite veggies—roasting, sauteing, steaming—and use different seasonings to create variety in your diet.
- Enjoy vegetables with a sauce or dip; the fats provided may help you better absorb the vitamins provided by the vegetables.

#### Fruits

Fruits provide dietary fiber, vitamins and minerals, and protective nutrients like antioxidants and phytochemicals. Fresh, frozen, and canned varieties provide equivalent nutrients but have different considerations. Wash fresh produce before using or eating. Look for low to no added sugar in frozen and canned options. Choose canned fruits in 100 percent fruit juice or water instead of syrup and consider rinsing them before enjoying. Adults should aim for about two cups of fruit daily.

#### Tips

- Add fresh or canned fruit to your cereal, oatmeal, or yogurt. Add frozen fruit with enough time to allow it to thaw. Consider prepping the night before or two hours before enjoying. Store in the refrigerator while it thaws.
- Enjoy a smoothie made with fresh, frozen, or canned fruits and yogurt or milk. Consider adding vegetables and grains for a balanced meal in a cup.
- Top your cereal, oatmeal, or yogurt with fruit. Some ideas include bananas, berries, peaches, and pineapple.
- Consider adding dried fruit, like raisins, cranberries, or other varieties, to a salad.
- Pack convenient fruits such as apples, bananas, or grapes for snacks on the go.
- With savory meals, consider fruit as a side dish. Fruit topped with yogurt, or some cinnamon can be satisfying and delicious. Baked apples are an excellent example.



## Step 2: Fill a Quarter of Your Plate with Grains

On one quarter of the plate, add a whole grain. This grain can be anything from whole-grain toast to whole-grain pasta in a casserole. Foods made from wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, or barley are grain products. Bread, pasta, rice, tortillas, and grits are examples. Cereals such as oatmeal and breakfast cereals are also included in this group.

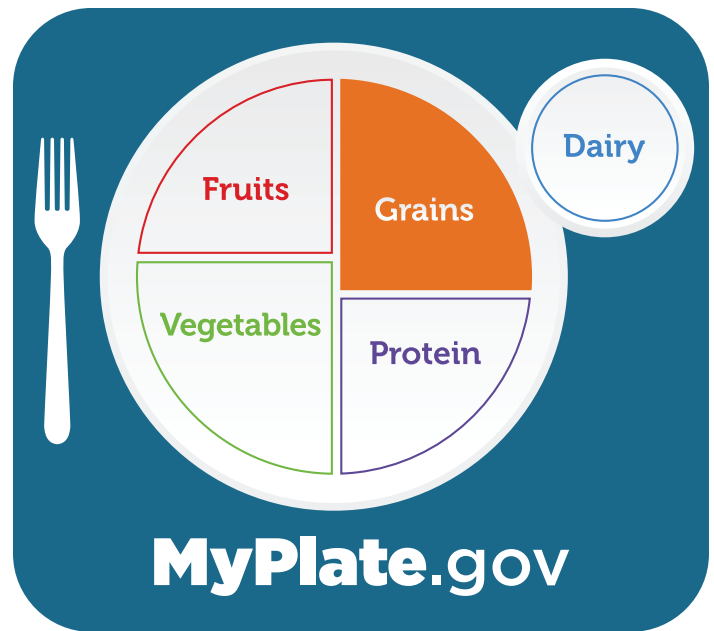
Grains are divided into two groups:

1. **Whole grains** contain all parts of the grain—the bran, germ, and endosperm. Many nutrients are stored in these parts, and they contribute fiber. Some examples of whole grains include whole-wheat flour, oatmeal, bulgur, whole cornmeal, popcorn, quinoa, and brown rice.
2. **Refined grains** have the bran and germ removed during milling. The grain has a finer texture but contains fewer nutrients because dietary fiber, B vitamins, and iron are removed in processing. Fortunately, many nutrients are added back to the refined grains, but they are still lower in fiber than their whole-grain counterparts.

Adults are encouraged to include at least six ounces of grains (about six servings) each day. This amount may differ, depending on age, activity level, gender, and other factors. When choosing a grain, reach for whole grains more often. The Dietary Guidelines encourage Americans to make half of their grain choices each day whole-grain options. Whole grains help reduce cholesterol and may lower your risk for heart disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes. It also helps the gut to function properly by supporting proper digestion and reducing constipation.

### Tips

- Start your day with oatmeal, overnight oats, or cereal using rolled oats.
- Add granola to yogurt with fresh, canned, or dried fruit.
- Add brown rice or quinoa to a salad.
- Choose whole-grain pasta varieties to make a pasta salad with vegetables and your favorite dressing or sauce.
- Use whole-wheat bread for your sandwich or toast.
- Enjoy popcorn alongside a protein, fat, fruit, or vegetable for a snack.



### Step 3: Fill a Quarter of Your Plate with Lean Protein Foods

Now that we know what fruits, vegetables, and grains we have on our plate, we need to decide what protein will go well with them and balance out the meal. Many people may think of meat as the main source of protein, but there are many protein foods that can be considered. The Dietary Guidelines recommend a varied protein routine to get the most nutritional bang for our buck.

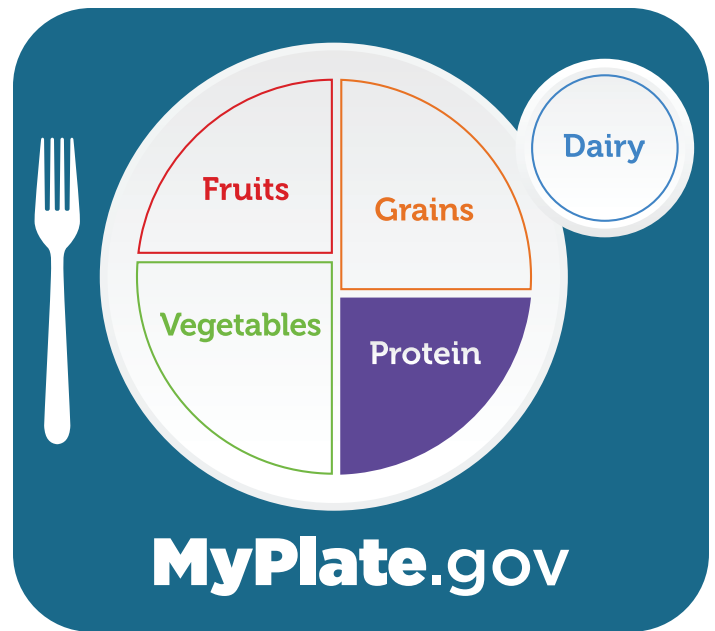
Protein foods include meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, beans, peas, lentils, processed soy products, nuts, and seeds. Plant sources of protein provide fiber in addition to protein. Some dairy foods are also high in protein, like Greek yogurt and cottage cheese.

The amount of protein needed depends on age, height, weight, health condition, life stage, and physical activity level. For adults, it is generally five to seven ounce-equivalents per day. One ounce-equivalent looks like one ounce of meat, poultry, or fish; one-quarter cup of cooked beans; one egg; one tablespoon of peanut butter; one-half ounce of nuts or seeds; one-quarter cup of tofu; or one ounce of cooked tempeh.

Try to include at least eight ounces of cooked seafood per week for adults. Frozen and canned varieties are available and provide equivalent nutrients to the fresh options. Reach for options canned in water and with no or low sodium added. Be cautious of excess sodium and saturated fat found in pre-seasoned or flavored canned and frozen varieties.

#### Tips

- Select a variety of protein foods to improve nutrient intake and health benefits. A balanced diet of both plant and animal proteins can help to ensure that your body gets the nutrients it needs throughout the day.
- Prioritize lean meats like chicken, turkey, lean beef, fish, and plant sources more often. Choose high-sodium and processed meats, such as hot dogs, sausages, pepperoni, and luncheon meats, less often.
- Plan meals around whole grains and vegetables rather than the protein food.



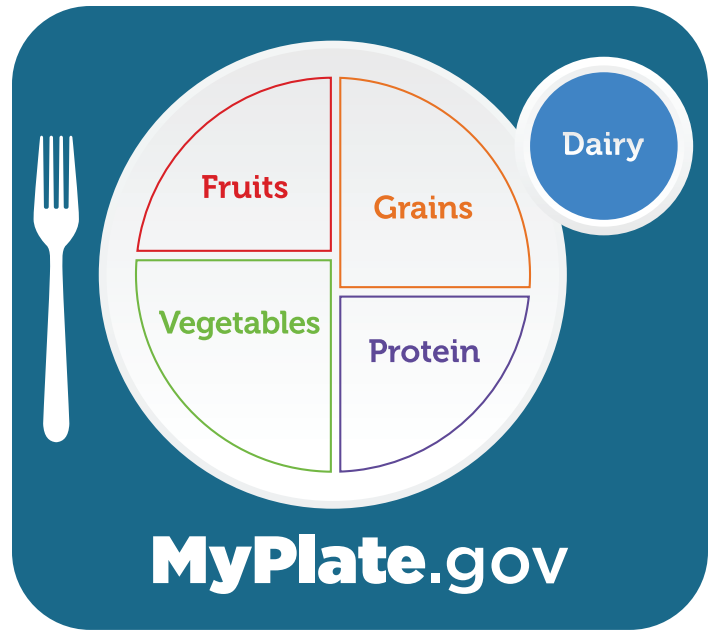
#### Step 4: Include Foods from the Dairy Group

Include a dairy food such as cheese, yogurt, or milk on the side or as part of a dish on your plate. Dairy products provide calcium, potassium, vitamin D, and protein that improve bone health and may reduce the risk of osteoporosis.

It is recommended that older children, teens, and adults have three cups of dairy a day. All fluid milk products and many foods made from milk are considered part of this food group. Calcium-fortified soy milk (soy beverage) is included, too. Foods made from milk that have little to no calcium, such as cream cheese, cream, and butter, are not considered part of the dairy group.

#### Tips

- Include milk or calcium-fortified soy milk with meals.
- Have yogurt or cheese as a snack.
- Add dairy to breakfast cereals and desserts.
- Add yogurt to fruit smoothies.
- Top a baked potato with plain Greek yogurt.
- If you do not drink milk, use fortified soy, almond, or other plant-based alternatives of milk.
- Add cheese to casseroles and other commonly prepared dishes.
- Use milk instead of water in recipes for certain baked goods and when preparing oatmeal.



## Can Desserts and Sweets Be Part of a Balanced Plate?

Filling half of your plate with fruits and vegetables and the other half with lean protein and some grains or starchy food, while also incorporating dairy on the side, gives your body the nutrients it needs. Building a balanced plate leaves room for some dessert or a sweet treat on the side. Sweet treats can be enjoyed in moderation and are often representative of more than just the food item, like a special occasion, celebration, or holiday. Often, they are enjoyed with the company of friends and family. Desserts and sweets can have a spot in a balanced eating pattern.

### Summary

When working toward a balanced eating pattern, taking it one meal or snack at a time may be easier to plan and prepare for. This means the pressure is “off your plate” to make every snack and meal perfect. The ideas incorporated into these meals and snacks add up over time to benefit your eating pattern as a whole.

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