

Mastering Food Choices

Understanding Healthy Food Choices

The average American makes over 200 food- and beverage-related choices each day. This number seems high, but it makes sense when we think about the decisions we make. We decide what food and beverages we will eat. We are exposed to a multitude of items in our grocery stores. We are bombarded with television advertisements to choose specific food. And there are many fast food options available in our communities.

In the U.S., food and beverage products are all around us, but

that doesn't mean they are all healthy options. It is important to recognize that food that is easiest to access in our communities and family traditions play large roles in our food-related decisions. These factors could be very different from those of someone who lives just 30 miles away.

When we think about making healthy food decisions, we first need to recognize what food is available to us and the factors we consider when we buy and prepare foods. Some common considerations when buying

food and beverages include cost, taste, nutrition, and how long the food will last before it spoils. What are the questions you ask yourself when you make food and beverage decisions each day?

- How much sugar goes into your morning coffee?
- Will you pack your lunch or buy something at the nearest fast food restaurant?
- Do you get a soda refill before you leave the restaurant?
- Will you have that piece of cake for a coworker's birthday?
- What's for dinner?

Food Choices and Health

Food choices have a direct impact on health. Most of us want to make food choices that will support a healthy body, but we may lack knowledge, time, money, skills, or access to healthy foods. This publication provides knowledge and enhances skills that will help us choose healthy foods, whether at home or on the go.



What food components should we limit when making food choices?

When purchasing foods and beverages, certain key words can serve as red flags. Several years of research have established that the following food components have negative effects on the body and limiting consumption may improve health.

Trans Fats. Small amounts of trans fats are found naturally in animal products. The primary source in the diet is artificially made in processed foods. Trans fats are added to products (e.g. crackers, snack foods, baked goods) to make them shelf-stable. These fats reduce your good HDL cholesterol and raise your bad LDL cholesterol, ultimately increasing your risk of developing heart disease.

Saturated Fats. Saturated fats are solid at room temperature and are commonly found in animal products and bakery items (cakes, cookies, doughnuts). It is recommended that less than 10 percent of our daily calories come from saturated fat (200 calories of a 2,000-calorie diet). Consumption of this type of fat may increase bad blood cholesterol and your risk for heart disease.

Sodium. Sodium is a mineral. In the American diet, sodium is most commonly found as salt in packaged and restaurant foods



(90%). Too much sodium disrupts our body's fluid balance and increases blood pressure, which is a significant risk factor for heart disease.

Added Sugar. When we see low-fat foods, we immediately think these will be better for us. It is still important to look at the nutrition facts label. Usually, the fat in low-fat foods is replaced with added sugar to preserve the taste. Research shows that added sugar in our foods has negative effects on our health. Be careful! Many foods you wouldn't suspect—such as ketchup, pasta sauce, and salad dressings—have high amounts of added sugar.

Standing at the Starting Line

We all want to make good decisions when it comes to our health. However, many of us don't know where to begin. We may know what food com-

ponents to limit, but building certain skills will make food decisions easier. These skills include:

- Understanding nutrition facts labels for food products in the grocery store
- Determining the nutrition in recipes we prepare at home
- Finding nutrition information for menu items while dining out

Nutrition facts labels

The nutrition facts label is a tool provided to help you make healthy food choices. Reading the nutrition facts label can be overwhelming; however, food choices become easier once you know what to look for. Taking time to read the nutrition facts label is a step in the right direction and serves as a good example for young children and youth. This list defines terms and provides tips for reading the nutrition facts label.

Serving. The suggested amount of food to be eaten at one time. The nutrition information on the label is *typically* based on one serving. Remember, a portion is how much of the food you choose to eat or drink.

Calories. The combined amount of energy for all food components in the product.

Percent daily value (%DV). The percentage of your total daily intake one serving of the food item provides for specific nutrients. Less than 5 percent is considered low for a nutrient and greater than 20 percent is considered high for a nutrient.

Nutrients to limit. Includes trans fat, saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar. For nutrients to limit, try to choose foods that are considered low (less than 5% of the %DV) throughout the day.

Nutrients to get more of. All common vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber. Common nu-

trients listed on nutrition facts labels include calcium, vitamin D, iron, and potassium. Be sure to get the full 100 percent of your %DV in all the foods you choose each day.

Ingredients. All ingredients in the food item from the highest amount to lowest amount.

Other things to look for. Smaller packages of food/beverages may show nutrition information for a single serving and for the entire package. Remember, small packages may not represent a single serving. For example, one 20-ounce bottle of soda does not represent a single serving.

Nutrition in recipes we prepare

When we prepare our own food, we have direct control of what goes into the dish. Consider how you prepare your food. Some cooking methods such as steaming and roasting are better options than sautéing or frying. Gradually reduce unhealthy ingredients in family recipes. Add bulk and nutrition to recipes by adding vegetables or whole grains. Online resources and nutrient calculators are available to aid in determining the nutrition of family favorite recipes.

Recipe nutrition information is available from a number of sources. A simple internet search for “recipe nutrition

calculator” will identify several free tools. For example, MyFitnessPal or SparkRecipes provide calories, carbs, fat, protein, and other nutrients. As new technologies and apps are developed, additional sources of information will become available.

Nutrition information for menu items

Restaurants and retail food establishments with more than 20 locations are required to provide calorie information on their menus. Use the following tips next time you are selecting a menu item at a restaurant:

- Some restaurants have nutrition information readily available in a handout or pamphlet.
- If you can't find nutrition information in the restaurant, ask the wait staff, the cashier, or host for help.
- If you have internet access, many larger restaurant chains have nutrition information easy to find on their websites.
- Look for low calorie options on menu.
- Keep in mind, low-carb menu options may be high in fat from large protein portions and cheese.



Make Healthy Food a Priority

We make so many decisions daily about what food we eat, but we actually spend very little time making those decisions. It is so tempting to choose the easier option, which is typically a highly processed convenience food. When making food decisions, it is important to keep in mind the foods we eat play a role in our overall health.

Having the skills necessary to identify healthy food options will improve our nutrition if we put them to use. So take a little extra time to make food-related decisions to bump your health up on your personal priority list.

Resources

- U.S. Food & Drug Administration. Food Label Helps Consumers Make Healthier Choices. <https://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm094536.htm>.
- U.S. Food & Drug Administration. Nutrition Information for Raw Fruits, Vegetables, and Fish. <https://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm063367.htm>.

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- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Know Your Limit for Added Sugar. <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/data-statistics/know-your-limit-for-added-sugars.html>.

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