Healthy diet: Do you know what to eat?

Introduction   If you're healthy now and want to stay that way, do you know what to eat? Suggestions on what and how much to eat can be confusing, especially when faced with varied and conflicting nutritional advice. Mayo Clinic dietitians can help. Here they outline nutritional recommendations designed to promote health and help prevent disease. Use these guidelines to plan your healthy diet. Click on the tabs to the left for a description of recommended nutrients and their amounts.   Carbohydrates   Description: Carbohydrates are your body's main energy source. Complex carbohydrates include legumes, grains and starchy vegetables, such as potatoes, peas and corn. Simple carbohydrates are found mainly in fruits and milk, as well as in foods made with sugar, such as candy and other sweets. Recommendation: Get 45 percent to 65 percent of your daily calories from carbohydrates. Emphasize complex carbohydrates, especially from whole grains and beans, and nutrient-rich fruits and milk. Limit sugars from candy and other sweets.   Protein   Description: Protein is essential to human life. Your skin, bones, muscles and organ tissue all contain protein. It's found in your blood, hormones and enzymes too. Protein is found in many plant foods. It comes from animal sources as well. Legumes, poultry, seafood, meat, dairy products, nuts and seeds are your richest sources of protein. Recommendation: Between 10 percent and 35 percent of your total daily calories — 50 to 175 grams a day — can come from protein. This recommendation is based on a 2000-calorie diet.   Fat   Description: Fats help your body absorb many essential vitamins, maintain the structure and function of cell membranes, and preserve the integrity of your immune system. But fat is a very concentrated energy source, providing twice as many calories per gram as carbohydrates and protein. And too much of certain types of fat — such as saturated fat and trans fat — can increase your blood cholesterol levels and your risk of coronary artery disease. Recommendation: Limit fat to 20 percent to 35 percent of your daily calories — 40 to 70 grams of fat a day if you consume a 2000-calorie diet. Emphasize fats from healthier sources, such as nuts and olive, canola and nut oils.   Saturated fat   Description: Saturated fat is most often found in animal products, such as red meat, poultry, butter and whole milk. Other foods high in saturated fat include coconut, palm and other tropical oils. Saturated fat is the main dietary culprit in raising your blood cholesterol and increasing your risk of coronary artery disease. Recommendation: Limit your daily intake of saturated fat to no more than 10 percent of your total calories. This equals 20 grams of saturated fat if you consume a 2000-calorie diet. Saturated fat intake is part of your total daily allowance for fat.   Trans fat   Description: Trans fat comes from adding hydrogen to vegetable oil through a process called hydrogenation. This makes the fat more solid and less likely to spoil. Trans fat is a common ingredient in commercial baked goods — such as crackers, cookies and cakes — and in fried foods, such as doughnuts and french fries. Shortenings and some types of margarine also are high in trans fat. Recommendation: The American Heart Association recommends that no more than 1 percent of your total daily calories be trans fat. If you consume 2,000 calories a day, that works out to 2 grams of trans fat or less.   Cholesterol   Description: Cholesterol is vital to the structure and function of all your cells, but it's also the main substance in fatty deposits (plaques) that can develop in your arteries. Your body makes all of the cholesterol it needs for cell function. You get additional cholesterol by eating animal foods, such as meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, dairy products and butter. Recommendation: Limit your intake of cholesterol to no more than 300 milligrams a day.   Fiber   Description: Fiber is the part of plant foods that your body doesn't digest and absorb. There are two basic types: soluble and insoluble. Insoluble fiber adds bulk to your stool and can help prevent constipation. Vegetables, wheat bran and other whole grains are good sources of insoluble fiber. Soluble fiber may help improve your cholesterol and blood sugar levels. Oats, dried beans and some fruits, such as apples and oranges, are good sources of soluble fiber. Recommendation: Women need 21 to 25 grams of fiber a day, and men need 30 to 38 grams of fiber a day.   Sodium   Description: Sodium helps maintain the right balance of fluids in your body, helps transmit nerve impulses, and influences the contraction and relaxation of muscles. Though necessary, too much sodium can be harmful. Most sodium in a person's diet comes from eating processed and prepared foods, such as canned vegetables, soups, luncheon meats and frozen foods. Therefore, avoid adding salt during cooking or at the table. Recommendation: Healthy adults need only between 1,500 and 2,400 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day.

About the Author

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