

# SPECIAL DIETS: NUTRITION BASICS



In this episode of the Home Alone Alliance<sup>SM</sup> video series on nutrition and special diets, a dietitian helps a mother and daughter understand how to plan a healthy, balanced, and tasty diet. Nutritional needs change with age and chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure or diabetes. A healthy diet can help keep you active and feeling well.

A word about terminology: Many people think of a *diet* as a way to lose weight. While a diet may have that purpose, the more general meaning of the term is simply what a person regularly eats. Content related to *Special diets* in this series includes tips on planning healthy menus, as well as managing challenging situations related to food.

## Creating a Healthy Plate

A healthy plate should consist of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fats, and proteins. For a colorful picture of the typical foods that can make up a healthy and tasty plate, go to the Tufts University Human Nutrition Research Center for Aging website at <https://hnrca.tufts.edu/myplate/files/MPFOA2015.pdf>. The Tufts website has many features to help create healthy menus for older adults.

In the video, the dietitian advises that **half of every meal should be made up of fruits and vegetables**. These foods are high in fiber and nutrients (the building blocks that sustain life) such as potassium and vitamin C, and add color and texture to a plate. Fiber is important to help with digestion and prevent constipation. Potassium is good for healthy blood pressure. Vitamin C helps heal cuts and wounds.

While fresh fruits and vegetables are the best choices, if it's too difficult or costly to buy them, substitute frozen or canned versions. Just check to make sure the fruits are not packed in sugary syrups, and the vegetables are packed with low or no salt. You can always rinse the contents to get rid of the excess sugar or salt. Today's markets carry a variety of fruits and vegetables, including those used in ethnic cuisines. Try a few new kinds while keeping old favorites on the menu.

What's on the other half of the plate? **A quarter of each meal should be whole grains**, such as whole wheat

bread, brown rice, or cereals such as oatmeal and whole grain cold cereals and pasta.

**Protein should make up the final quarter of the meal.** Proteins are especially important when a person is dealing with a chronic or acute illness or otherwise under stress. Inadequate protein can lead to muscle weakness, problems walking, and slower recovery from illness. Lean meat, chicken, fish, eggs, milk, and cheese are good sources of protein. Many people start meal planning by choosing the protein and adding the other categories. You can vary a protein routine by experimenting with main dishes made with legumes (e.g., beans, peas, lentils) and eating plant proteins (e.g., tofu, veggie burgers, chickpeas) more often.

Limit saturated or trans fats, sodium (another video in this series covers this topic), total carbohydrates, and added sugar, especially for those with diabetes or heart conditions.

These suggestions are only a start; ask your health care professional if there are any foods that you or your family member should avoid or that will interfere with the absorption of medications. For example, grapefruit juice can lower the levels of enzymes in the liver responsible for breaking down medications such as statins, which reduce "bad" or LDL cholesterol levels. Many prescription labels carry warnings about foods to avoid while taking the medication.

## Reading Food Labels

If you haven't looked at a food label lately, you're in for a pleasant surprise. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has revised the labels so they are easier to read and understand. The new labels are being phased in and are required for major food manufacturers by January 1, 2020, and for smaller manufacturers by the following year. Many manufacturers are already using the new label.

As the video shows, the information for a single serving and the total number of servings in a container are listed in bold lettering at the top of the label. The video example shows a label for a box of fusilli, a popular type of pasta. The box contains seven servings of three-fourths a cup each. Each serving is 210 calories. Remember that this does not include any sauce or cheese you add to the pasta when you serve it. The label also contains information about the amount of fat or nutrients each serving contributes to your daily intake. It also tells you the total amount of sugar added to the product, an important item if you need to cut down on sugar.

The food label will also tell you whether the food is high in saturated fats—the kind you want to limit as much as possible. Healthy fats—such as those found in vegetable oils, margarines, and butter spreads—are good for you because they provide vitamins that are soluble in fats.

Portion size is very important. The video suggests using a baseball, deck of cards, or dice—or objects of comparable size—to measure a recommended serving. With practice you will get very good at estimating portion size, whether you are at home or eating out. A food scale is an important tool if you have to be very precise about the portion size. Also don't forget the old standby—measuring cups.

Remember that it is important to drink a lot of fluids during the day and with meals. Water is always the best choice; tea and coffee in moderation are acceptable, but avoid sugary sodas and drinks.

## Additional Resources

For more information on the new FDA Nutrition Facts Label, go to <https://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm387114.htm>.

The US Department of Agriculture's advice for older adults, which can be found at <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/older-adults>, includes these items:

Add flavor to foods with spices and herbs instead of salt and look for low- or no-sodium packaged foods.

- > Add sliced fruits and vegetable to your meals and snacks. Look for presliced fruits and vegetables if slicing and chopping is a challenge.
- > Ask your doctor to suggest other options if the medications you take affect your appetite.
- > Drink three cups of fat-free or low-fat milk throughout the day. If you cannot tolerate milk, try small amounts of yogurt, buttermilk, hard cheese, or lactose-free foods.
- > Consume foods fortified with vitamin B12, such as fortified cereals.
- > Drink water instead of sugary drinks.

The USDA also has recipes for healthy meals at <https://whatscooking.fns.usda.gov/search/recipes>.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has a variety of informative short articles and tips about nutrition and health, written by nutritionists and registered dietitians, available at <https://www.eatright.org/for-seniors>. This link is particularly focused on information for older adults.

Fruits and Veggies More Matters is an organization that advocates for increased intake of fruits and vegetables in the American diet. The website has a useful list of the key nutrients in different fruits and vegetables at <https://fruitsandveggies.org/stories/key-nutrients-that-protect/>.

For simple recipes that create a healthy diet, go to [www.AARP.org/NoLongerAlone](http://www.AARP.org/NoLongerAlone).

*AARP Public Policy Institute  
Prepared by Carol Levine, United Hospital Fund*