

C and rickets in vitamin D, although these deficiency illnesses are now rare in the UK. Vitamins and minerals also help to support the immune system and guard against illness in the long term.

### Vitamin and mineral supplements

Most of us should be able to get all the vitamins and minerals we need from a balanced diet. Certain groups of people will benefit from a vitamin or mineral supplement. These include children from six months to five years old and women who are pregnant or might get pregnant, who should take folic acid supplements.

Some other groups of people chose to take supplements. If you choose to take a supplement, don't be tempted to take very high doses as some vitamins and minerals are toxic in large quantities.

### Practical tips for a better diet

- Eat more wholegrain starchy carbohydrates, ie wholemeal bread, brown rice, wholegrain cereals. It can help to alter the balance of everyday meals, for instance, more bread and less sandwich filling, more pasta and less creamy sauce.
- Eat more fruit and vegetables, aiming for at least five portions a day. Include fruit at breakfast and salad at lunch.

This factsheet is based on reputable sources of medical evidence and has been reviewed by BUPA doctors. For more details of references and sources, please see our website. The content is intended for general information only and does not replace the need for personal advice from a qualified health professional.

- Cut down on salt by eating less processed food, such as ready meals, and adding less salt to food.
- Eat a varied diet. Change your shopping list every week to help keep you out of unhealthy food ruts and make eating more enjoyable.
- Eat regular meals - although it doesn't matter when you eat your food, a regular routine helps most people to control their diet and their weight .
- Control your portion sizes so that over time, if not necessarily every day, the amount of energy you consume matches your level of activity.
- Try to be more physically active. Aim for 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. Activity helps to regulate your appetite, and means that you can eat more without gaining weight.
- Drink alcohol only within sensible limits: not more than 14 units per week for women (and no more than three in any one day) and not more than 21 units per week for men (and no more than four in any one day).

### Further information

#### British Nutrition Foundation

[www.nutrition.org.uk](http://www.nutrition.org.uk)

#### Food Standards Agency

[www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)

# Healthy eating

The amount and type of food we eat has a major influence on our health. Unfortunately, it is easy to eat badly, with a diet that contains too much of the wrong foods, such as high-fat convenience meals, and not enough of the nutritious foods, such as fruit and vegetables.

### A balanced approach

Healthy eating is about learning which foods to eat to stay well. But it is also about integrating a balance and variety of different foods into an enjoyable daily routine.

### Why we need to eat well

The body needs a constant supply of energy to power the continuous processes of life, such as the heartbeat, breathing and digestion. Energy is also needed to grow and repair the body's tissues, and to power the muscles for movement.

This energy is provided by food and drink. The energy content is measured in calories (kilocalories, Kcal). In addition to energy, we need to make sure the diet includes essential nutrients such as protein, fats, vitamins and minerals.

The food choices we make can have a long-term impact on health. There

is good evidence that eating a healthy diet can reduce the risk of illnesses such as diabetes, obesity, coronary heart disease and several cancers (especially bowel cancer).

### What is healthy eating?

According to most dieticians, there are no unhealthy foods, only unhealthy diets. Healthy eating is about eating the right quantity and balance of foods, month in month out, and not about whether you succumb to fish and chips or a slice of chocolate cake once in a while.

Eating the right balance of foods from the major food groups is the foundation of day-to-day wellbeing, and will reduce your long-term risk of disease.

There are three major food groups: carbohydrate, fat and protein. These have different functions in the body.

## Carbohydrate

Carbohydrate is the body's preferred source of fuel. Carbohydrate should make up about 50% of daily energy intake. There are two main types of carbohydrate - complex and simple. Complex carbohydrates include starch and fibre. Simple carbohydrates include sugars.

We should get most of our carbohydrate from the complex carbohydrates. These include starchy "fillers" such as bread, potatoes, pasta, rice and chapati. Complex carbohydrate foods tend to be bulky, so eating them makes a satisfying meal. They can also be rich in nutrients and fibre (which is good for the bowel), and low in calories relative to their weight. Each gram provides around four calories. Choose wholegrain varieties whenever possible as these also contain more fibre.

The rest of our carbohydrate intake comes from foods and drinks that contain sugar, including fruit and vegetables, milk, confectionery, sugar and soft drinks.

Most people would benefit from eating a higher proportion of starchy carbohydrate in their daily diet. This tends to result in a diet that is lower in fat, and higher in dietary fibre, especially if wholegrain varieties are chosen.

Eating at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day is also highly recommended. There is good evidence

that fruit and vegetables cut the risk of disease, including some cancers and heart disease. In any case, they can be filling, low in calories and high in fibre.

Foods high in refined sugar such as table sugar, sugary drinks and confectionery provide "empty calories". This means that apart from the energy the sugar provides, there is often very little else of nutritional value. Sugar also contributes to tooth decay and gum disease, and can cause blood sugar levels to fluctuate excessively. It is a good idea to limit your sugar intake.

### Alcohol

The body readily converts alcohol to carbohydrate - each gram provides about seven calories. Like refined sugar, alcohol provides "empty calories". This is one of the reasons why alcohol should be limited in a healthy diet.

### Fat

Fat is the most energy-dense nutrient, providing around nine calories of energy in each gram. Fat also provides fatty acids which are needed for many vital functions in the body.

In small quantities, fat is essential for good health but it should represent no more than 35% of daily energy intake.

Eating a lot of fat, particularly saturated fat, is unhealthy. It increases the risk of cardiovascular disease (including heart attack and stroke) and, because it is so rich in calories, makes it much easier to become obese. Most of us should aim

to reduce the proportion of saturated fats in our diet, and also the total fat content of our diet.

**Saturated fats** are solid at room temperature, and come from meat and dairy products. A high intake of saturated fat increases the risk of cardiovascular disease. You should aim to consume no more than 10% of your total energy from saturated fats. Cutting the fat off meat and eating lower-fat versions of dairy foods - semi-skimmed milk, yoghurt instead of cream, etc - can help to achieve this.

**Unsaturated fats** come mainly from vegetable and fish sources. They tend to be liquid at room temperature. Unsaturated fats are divided into two types - monounsaturates and polyunsaturates. They are both healthier than saturated fats, and it makes sense to replace some of the saturated fats in your diet with unsaturated ones - replacing butter with olive oil, meat with fish.

Most of us need to increase our intake of omega 3 fatty acids. This type of fatty acid helps to protect us against heart disease. Eating a portion of oily fish (eg sardines, mackerel or salmon) every week is a good way to meet your omega 3 requirements.

**Cholesterol** is another type of fat, which is mostly made by the body in the liver. High levels of cholesterol in the blood increase the risk of heart disease. Certain foods are high in

cholesterol, including eggs and offal. However, dietary cholesterol does not contribute much to blood cholesterol in most people. Saturated fats contribute more to blood cholesterol, so it's more important to reduce these.

### Protein

Protein provides about four calories in each gram, but this energy is less readily released than from carbohydrate. Protein should represent around 15% of our daily calorie intake.

We mainly use protein to build and repair our body tissues. All animal and plant foods contain some protein. Protein provided by animal foods is closest to the proteins needed by the body. However, a balanced vegetarian diet also provides adequate protein.

Most people in the UK eat a reasonable amount and don't need to alter their protein intake. However, it makes sense to ensure that the protein foods you choose are low in fat. For instance, instead of high fat chicken nuggets, try lean pieces of chicken or pulses such as beans or chickpeas.

### Micronutrients

As well as the major food groups, we need a small amount of many vitamins and minerals. These perform various jobs in the body, helping chemical and biological reactions take place.

Vitamin or mineral deficiencies can lead to illness - scurvy in the case of vitamin