

Know Your Food Groups

Unhealthy eating habits have contributed to the obesity epidemic in the United States: about one-third of U.S. adults (33.8%) are obese and approximately 17% (or 12.5 million) of children and adolescents aged 2—19 years are obese.

Even for people at a healthy weight, a poor diet is associated with major health risks that can cause illness and even death. These include heart disease, hypertension (high blood pressure), type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and certain types of cancer.



Review this month's spotlight to learn about each of the major food groups and how you can adjust your diet to ensure you're getting the right balance. Complete the monthly quiz for a chance to win a \$25 gift card!

The Major Food Groups

By making smart food choices, you can help protect yourself from health problems. Knowing the food groups can help you get the nutritious foods you need.

1. Grains

Any food made from wheat, rye, rice, oats, cornmeal, barley, or another cereal grain is a grain product. In addition to bread and pasta, there are cereal, rice, grits, tortillas, even popcorn. Many people find it easy to eat more grains than needed.

Look for grain choices that are low in saturated and trans fat and low in added sugar when possible. But be careful—low-fat baked goods can be high in added sugar.

Try to choose grain products made from whole grains. Make sure the first food on the ingredients list contains the word "whole," such as whole wheat, whole oats, or whole grain. Other whole grains include popcorn, brown rice, wild rice, buckwheat, bulgur, and quinoa. Whole grains can help you add fiber to your diet. For more on fiber, see [Important Nutrients to Know](#).

Examples of an ounce-equivalent grain:

- Slice of bread
- Small (2-½ -inch) muffin
- 1 cup of flaked cereal
- ½ cup of cooked rice, pasta, or cooked cereal
- 3 cups of popcorn
- 6-inch corn or flour tortilla

2. Vegetables

Sometimes, vegetables get a bum rap. That's a shame because delicious vegetables come in a wide variety of colors and flavors. Dark green vegetables include broccoli, collard greens, spinach, and kale. Some red and orange vegetables are acorn squash, carrots, pumpkin, tomato, and sweet potato. Starchy vegetables are foods like corn, green peas, and white potatoes.

Other vegetables include eggplant, beets, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, celery, artichokes, and onions. Beans and peas (not green peas) include black beans, garbanzo beans (chickpeas), lima beans, soybeans, and tofu. These can also be counted in the [protein foods group](#).

Examples of ½ cup of vegetables equals:

- Cup of uncooked leafy vegetables
- 6 baby carrots or 1 medium carrot
- ½ large baked sweet potato
- 5 broccoli florets
- ½ large (3 x 4-inch) red pepper
- ½ cup cooked green beans

3. Fruits

Like most Americans, older people generally do not eat enough fruit. Yet, there are so many choices—citrus fruits like oranges and grapefruits; different kinds of berries; fruits that grow on trees such as apricots, cherries, peaches, and mangoes; and others like figs, raisins, and pineapples. Try some fruits that you haven't eaten before. Fruits with skins like apples and pears provide extra fiber that promotes [regularity](#).

TIP: SNACKING

When you are out and need a snack, don't be tempted by a candy bar. Instead, take along some fruit or raw vegetables in a plastic bag when you go out.

Examples of ½ cup of fruit equals:

- Small piece of fruit such as a 2-inch peach
- ¼ cup dried fruit
- 1/8 medium cantaloupe
- 4 ounces of 100% fruit juice
- ½ medium grapefruit
- 16 grapes

4. Protein

It can be a surprise to find out how often you eat more than the suggested amount of protein. But, simply cutting back on other food groups to keep your calories in line won't solve the problem because you'll be missing out on the nutrients those food groups give you.

In addition to watching how much food with protein you eat, try to choose lean or low-fat foods. Higher-fat choices count as added fats and oils. Try to eat seafood instead of meat at least twice a week to balance your proteins. Small fish, like sardines or trout, or farm-raised fish (check the label) contain less mercury than large fish, like tuna. Mercury can be harmful.

TIP: VEGETABLES OR PROTEIN

Are you confused about whether beans, peas, and foods made from soybeans should be counted as **vegetables** or **protein foods**? It's up to you. Here's an example: if you eat ½ cup of baked beans with dinner, you get to choose whether to count the beans as ½ cup of **vegetables** or 2 ounces of **protein foods**, depending on what else you've eaten during the day.

Examples of 1 ounce serving of protein equals:

- 12 almonds or 7 walnut halves
- 1 Tablespoon peanut butter
- ½ cup lentil or bean soup
- ¼ cup tofu
- 1 Egg
- 2 tablespoons hummus

5. Dairy

Most adults do not get enough dairy products. For your **heart health**, always try to pick from the many low-fat or fat-free choices in the dairy products food group. Choosing fat-free or low-fat milk and yogurt, rather than cheese, gives you important **vitamins and minerals** and less sodium and **fat**.

1 cup of milk is the same as:

- 1 cup or 8 ounces yogurt
- 1 ½ ounces hard cheese, such as cheddar, mozzarella, Swiss, or Parmesan
- 1/3 cup shredded cheese
- 1 calcium-fortified soy beverage
- 2 cups cottage cheese

- 1 cup pudding made with milk

6. Oils

Oils are high in calories, but they are also an important source of nutrients like vitamin E. If possible, use oils instead of solid fats, like butter, when cooking. Measuring your daily oils can be tricky—knowing what you add while cooking or baking is one thing. But, oil is naturally part of some foods.

How much oil is in:

- ½ medium avocado has 3 teaspoons of oil
- 4 large ripe olives have ½ teaspoon of oil
- 1 tablespoon of peanut butter has 2 teaspoons of oil

7. Solid Fats

For most people, the [U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) Food Patterns](#) allow extra calories every day for solid fats and added sugars (SoFAS) in the processed foods they eat.

Choosing foods that are low in fat and without added sugar whenever possible might just leave you with some extra calories left over each day. These extra calories can be used as you like. Some mornings you could have a glazed donut—but don't forget to count it as a grain and don't go over your suggested limits for SoFAS.

A Special Note About Added Sugars

With both the [USDA Food Patterns](#) and the [Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension \(DASH\) Eating Plan](#), added sugars mean more calories without more nutrients. For some people, added sugars can lead to higher levels of fats in the blood, raising their risk of heart disease.

Read the [ingredients label](#) to see if the processed foods you are eating have added sugar. In addition to other updates, food labels will now include "Added Sugars" on the Nutrition Facts label to inform consumers of their sugar intake. Check the labels for the key words shown in the chart to find out if your food has any added sugars.

Added Sugars: Words to Know

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|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| ▪ Brown sugar | ▪ Glucose | ▪ Malt syrup |
| ▪ Corn sweetener | ▪ High-fructose corn syrup | ▪ Molasses |
| ▪ Corn syrup | | ▪ Raw sugar |
| ▪ Dextrose | ▪ Honey | ▪ Sucrose |
| ▪ Fructose | ▪ Invert sugar | ▪ Sugar |
| ▪ Fruit juice concentrate | ▪ Lactose | ▪ Maple syrup |
| | ▪ Maltose | |