

Tipping The Balance

Healthy eating is about what you eat, not about what you don't. There are just 8 simple guidelines you need to follow if you want to achieve a healthy, balanced diet.

These are:

- **Enjoy** your food
- Eat a wide **variety** of foods
- Eat the right **amount** to be a healthy weight
- Eat plenty of foods rich in **starch** or **fibre**
- Eat plenty of **fruits** and **vegetables**
- Don't eat too many foods that contain a lot of **fat**
- Don't have **sugary** foods and drinks too often
- If you drink **alcohol** drink sensibly.

Enjoy Your Food

Healthy eating doesn't mean cutting out the everyday foods that taste nice. You may think that all your favourite meals are bad for you, but the truth is there is no such thing as a bad food. That said, there are a few small changes you can make in order to rebalance your diet towards a healthier way of eating.

These include simple measures like:

- Grilling or baking meat or fish where possible instead of frying - this applies to the sausages and bacon especially!
- Baking or boiling potatoes instead of frying or roasting
- Why not try stir frying meat or vegetables in the minimum of oil?
- If you're having Italian dishes, eat a spoonful more pasta and a spoonful less sauce
- Using reduced fat milk in sauces and low-fat fromage frais or plain yoghurt instead of cream.
- And always serve salads or vegetables with main meals

Eat a Variety of Foods

Our bodies need around 40 different nutrients to stay healthy. The principle behind this guideline is simple, and relatively unscientific - the more variety we have in our food intake the more likely we are to cover all the nutrients. While that is true, there are certain proportions in which different types of food should be eaten and this is where we find the balance

The image shows the 'Food Guide pyramid' from the Department of Health and Children. There are five different food groups:

fruit and vegetables; breads, other cereals and potatoes; meat, fish and alternatives; milk and dairy foods; and foods containing fat and sugar, or 'extras'.



Breads, Cereals and Potatoes

These foods should form the main part of a meal or snack, and add up to about a third of all the food eaten in a day. Many people still believe that starchy foods such as breads and potatoes are fattening but that's not true. Bread, rice, pasta, breakfast cereals and potatoes and other starchy food supply essential nutrients such as vitamins, minerals and protein, as well as starch and fibre. They are filling, while being much lower in calories than foods containing a lot of fat. Moreover the fibre in starchy foods promotes satiety (a feeling of being full) as well as helping to regulate the digestive system.

The one danger with this group is that traditionally they are accompanied by fats, for example, butter, spreads, dressings, sauces and fillings. It's these you need to go easy on, not the starchy foods themselves.

The Fruit and Vegetable Group

Fruit and vegetables contain many different vitamins and minerals that help maintain a healthy body. They also contain soluble fibre, which is the type of fibre that may reduce the amount of cholesterol in the blood. There is some evidence that eating plenty of fruit and vegetables may help reduce the incidence of many lifestyle diseases, like heart disease and cancer.

The 'take home' message is this - try to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day –

A banana on your toast or cereal, a glass of juice with breakfast, some salad vegetables on your sandwich, a piece of fruit for a snack, and two types of vegetables in your dinner and you have more than enough. If you can think about eating at least one fruit or vegetable at every meal, it's difficult to fail.

Dairy Foods

The third essential food group is the dairy group, the reason being that this group of foods provide the richest source of calcium in our diet. It's not news to anybody now that calcium is essential for healthy bones. What you may not be aware of is the extent of the problem of osteoporosis. It now affects 1 in 4 women and one in 12 men, according to the World Health Organisation. This means that even when on a weight loss diet, it is still vital to maintain a good intake of dairy products; three to four portions of dairy foods is about right. But choose the lower fat versions, skimmed or semi-skimmed milk instead of whole milk, low fat yoghurt and cheese and use fromage frais instead of cream in recipes where possible. The low fat dairy foods provide just as much calcium, protein and B vitamins.

Meat, Fish and Alternatives

Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, nuts, beans, peas and lentils are all included in this group. This group is important because of the protein it provides. Protein is essential for healthy growth in children, and for maintenance of muscle mass and repair of body tissues in adults. These foods also provide many vitamins and minerals. Iron is particularly important since red meat is the richest available source, and because 50% of 18-50 year old women in Ireland have a low iron intake according to the North South Food Consumption Survey.

However, if you choose not to eat meat, pulses such as beans, peas and lentils also contain some iron. The thing to remember for this group is that you don't need large amounts and that you should go easier on the fattier meat, like sausages and bacon, as well as choosing leaner cuts and lean mince. The way you cook meat is also very important if you are watching your fat intake; always grill or bake instead of frying or roasting. You should also be aware that eggs and nuts contain a relatively high amount of fat.

Sweet and Fatty Foods

Are those 'extras' really allowed on a healthy diet?!

While this group will not add much more than sugar and fat to your diet in terms of nutrition, what it does add is some extra choice and interest. Some foods containing fats like margarines, reduced fat spreads and cooking oils will be eaten most day, but try to use small amounts.

Other foods containing fat, like cakes and pastries, can be included in a healthy diet provided they are not eaten too often. What you must bear in mind is that every gram of fat has twice as many calories as a gram of protein or carbohydrate. If you have a sweet tooth, sugary foods like sweets or fizzy drinks should be eaten at meal times because that reduces the risk of tooth decay.