

# Healthy Eating

A healthy diet helps to prevent, or reduce the severity of, diseases such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes. A healthy diet may also help to reduce the risk of developing some cancers. Also, a main way of combating obesity and overweight is to eat a healthy diet. This leaflet gives the principles of a healthy diet.

## Eat plenty of starchy foods (complex carbohydrates)

Starchy foods such as bread, cereals, potatoes, rice, and pasta, together with fruit and vegetables, should provide the bulk of most meals. Some people wrongly think that starchy foods are 'fattening'. In fact, they contain about half the calories than the same weight of fat. (However, it is easy to add fat to some starchy foods. For example, by adding butter to jacket potatoes or bread, or by adding oil to potatoes to make chips, etc.)

Also, starchy foods often contain a lot of fibre (roughage). When you eat starchy foods, you get a feeling of fullness (satiety) which helps to control appetite. Tips to increase starchy foods include:

- For most meals, include generous portions of rice, pasta, baked potatoes, or bread.
- For more fibre, choose wholemeal bread. When baking, use at least 1/3 wholemeal flour.
- If you have cereals for breakfast, choose porridge, high fibre cereals, or wholemeal cereals (without sugar coating).
- Have tea breads, and plain or fruit scones, instead of sugary cakes and biscuits.

## Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables

It is recommended that we eat at least **five portions**, and ideally 7-9 portions, of a variety of fruit or vegetables each day. If you eat a lot of 'fruit and veg', then your chance of developing heart disease, a stroke, or bowel cancer are reduced. In addition, 'fruit and veg':

- contain lots of fibre which help to keep your bowels healthy. Problems such as constipation and diverticular disease are less likely to develop.
- contain plenty of vitamins and minerals, which are needed to keep you healthy.
- are naturally low in fat.
- are filling but are low in calories.

One portion of fruit or vegetables is roughly equivalent to one of the following.

- One large fruit such as an apple, pear, banana, orange, or a large slice of melon or pineapple.
- Two smaller fruits such as plums, kiwis, satsumas, clementines, etc.
- One cup of small fruits such as grapes, strawberries, raspberries, cherries, etc.
- Two large tablespoons of fruit salad, stewed or canned fruit in natural juices.
- One tablespoon of dried fruit.
- One glass of fresh fruit juice (150ml).
- A normal portion of any vegetable (about two tablespoons).
- One dessert bowl of salad.

Some tips on how to increase fruit and vegetables in your diet include:

- Try some different types which you have not tried before. The variety of tastes and textures may be surprising. Juices, frozen, canned, and dried varieties all count.
- Try adding chopped bananas, apples, or other fruits to breakfast cereals.
- Aim to include at least two different vegetables with most main meals. Do not over-boil vegetables. Steaming, stir-frying, or lightly boiling are best to retain the nutrients.

- Always offer fruit or fruit juice to accompany meals.
- Try new recipes which include fruit. For example, some curries or stews include fruit such as dried apricots. Have fruit based puddings. Fruit with yoghurt is a common favourite.
- How about cherry tomatoes, carrot sticks, dried apricots, or other fruits as part of packed lunches? A banana sandwich is another idea for lunch.
- Fruit is great for snacks. Encourage children to snack with fruit rather than with sweets.

## Eat plenty of fibre (roughage)

Fibre is the part of food that is not digested. It is filling, but has few calories. It helps the bowels to move regularly, which reduces constipation and other bowel problems. Fibre may also help to lower your cholesterol level. Starchy foods, and fruit and vegetables contain the most fibre. So the tips above on starchy foods and fruit and vegetables will also increase fibre. Have plenty to drink when you eat a high fibre diet (at least 6-8 cups of fluid a day).

## Eat protein foods in moderation

Meat, fish, nuts, pulses, chicken, and similar foods are high in protein. You need a certain amount of protein to keep healthy. However, most people eat more protein than is necessary. Beware, some meats are also high in fat. Choose poultry such as chicken, or lean meat. Also, many meat based recipes include creamy or fatty sauces which are high in calories.

**Fish.** There is some evidence that eating oily fish helps to protect against heart disease. Oily fish include: herring, sardines, mackerel, salmon, fresh tuna (not tinned), kippers, pilchards, trout, whitebait, anchovies and swordfish. It is probably the 'omega-3 fatty acids' in the fish oil that helps to reduce the build up of atheroma (furring of the arteries) which causes angina and heart attacks. Aim to eat at least two portions of fish per week, one of which should be oily.

## Do not eat too much fat

A low-fat diet helps to reduce the chance of developing diseases such as heart disease and stroke. It will also help you to reduce weight. The **total amount** of fat should be low. Also, the **type** of fat is important. You should not have much saturated fats such as butter, lard, dripping, and unspecified margarine. Unsaturated fats are better such as corn oil, sunflower oil, olive oil, and low fat spreads. Tips to reduce fat in your diet include the following.

- Whenever possible, do not fry food. It is better to grill, bake, poach, barbecue, or boil food. If you do fry, use unsaturated oil. Drain the oil off the food before eating.
- Choose lean cuts of meat, and cut off any excess fat.
- Avoid adding unnecessary fat to food. For example, use low fat spreads, spread less butter or margarine on bread, measure out small portions of oil for cooking, etc.
- Watch out for hidden fats that are in pastries, chocolate, cakes, and biscuits.
- Have low-fat milk, cheeses, yoghurts, and other dairy foods rather than full-fat varieties.
- Avoid cream. Use low fat salad cream, or low-fat yoghurt as a cream substitute.

## Do not have too many sugary foods and drinks

Sugary foods and drinks are high in calories, and too much may cause weight gain. It isn't just the amount of sugar that may be bad. Eating small amounts of sugary foods (sweets etc) too often is bad for teeth. Tips include:

- Try not to add sugar to tea, coffee, and breakfast cereals. Your taste for sweetness often changes with time. Use artificial sweeteners only if necessary.
- Reduce sugar in any kind of recipe. Use fruit as an alternative to add sweetness to recipes.
- Try sugar-free drinks. Give children water as their main drink.
- If you eat chocolate or sweets, try and keep the quantity down. Eating them as part of a meal, and then brushing your teeth, is better than between meals as snacks.

## Do not eat too much salt

Too much salt increases the risk of developing high blood pressure. Government guidelines recommend that we should have no more than 5-6 grams of salt per day. (Most people in the UK currently have more than this.) If you are used to a lot of salt, try to gradually reduce the amount that you have. Your taste for salt will eventually change. Tips on how to reduce salt include:

- Use herbs and spices to flavour food rather than salt.
- Limit the amount of salt used in cooking, and do not add salt to food at the table.
- Choose foods labelled 'no added salt'.
- As much as possible, avoid processed foods, salt-rich sauces, take-aways, and packet soups which are often high in salt.

## Keep alcohol within the recommended limits

There is some evidence that drinking 1-2 units of alcohol per day may help to protect against heart disease. But, drinking above the recommended limits can lead to serious problems. For example, drinking heavily can damage the liver, brain, stomach, pancreas, and heart. It can also cause high blood pressure. Also, alcohol contains a lot of calories, and too much can cause weight gain.

- **Men** should drink no more than 21 units of alcohol per week (and no more than four units in any one day).
- **Women** should drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week (and no more than three units in any one day).
- **Pregnant women** - the amount that is safe is not known, so many women have little or no alcohol when they are pregnant.

### What is a unit of alcohol?

One unit of alcohol is 10 ml (1 cl) by volume, or 8 g by weight, of pure alcohol. For example:

- One unit of alcohol is about equal to:
  - Half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager, or cider (3–4% alcohol by volume), or
  - A small pub measure (25 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume), or
  - A standard pub measure (50 ml) of fortified wine such as sherry or port (20% alcohol by volume).
- There are one and a half units of alcohol in:
  - A small glass (125 ml) of ordinary strength wine (12% alcohol by volume), or
  - A standard pub measure (35 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume).

## Further information

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

© EMIS and PIP 2005 Updated: July 2006 PRODIGY Validated

Comprehensive patient resources are available at [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)