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Health Plans for Employment: Nutrition

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Nutrition

Many people find that eating a balanced diet helps them manage their health conditions. Conditions like gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, weight, and fatigue problems can get in the way of reaching important life goals. This fact sheet describes how making changes to your diet can help you manage certain health conditions in order to reach (and maintain) your employment goals.

Introduction

We often neglect nutrition when we have competing demands on our time. We stop by the vending machine rather than pack a lunch. We eat fast foods that are often high in fat, salt and sugar. Unfortunately, eating unhealthy foods can lead to health problems. A poor diet increases the risk of chronic health conditions like obesity, type II diabetes, and heart disease.

The Benefits of Healthy Eating

Eating well is important for long-term health and energy. Healthy foods give your body nutrients to function well. Each of the food groups plays an important role in keeping you fit and at your best. Eating a healthy diet that includes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, proteins, and healthy fats gives you energy for the day. This

is especially important if you experience fatigue, anxiety or stress. Fruits and vegetables are also important because they help lower your risk of cancer and other diseases. They also keep your body systems (like your heart and digestive system) running well. It is also important to get enough dairy and protein in your diet. Dairy products (such as low fat yogurt or milk) help make your bones strong. Foods that contain protein (like lean meats and beans) support your immune system and help build muscle.



Eat a healthy, balanced diet.

Healthy eating begins with making good choices about what to eat, when to eat, and how much to eat. It also means eating good foods in moderation and avoiding “junk” foods as much as possible. Choosing nutritious foods will keep you full of energy and protect you against disease.



U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Dietary Guidelines

The USDA has guidelines for healthy eating. These recommendations apply to most people. If you have certain health conditions or take certain medications, however, you may need to make adjustments. A registered dietitian can help you develop a plan that will work for you.

Guideline 1: Maintain a healthy weight by watching your calories.

A healthy weight can be maintained by balancing the calories you eat with the calories (or energy) you use through physical activity. Here are a few tips to help you reach a good balance:

- Enjoy your food, but eat less.
- Avoid oversized portions.
- Increase your physical activity.

Guideline 2: Increase healthy food options.

- **Make half your grains whole.** Eat whole grain cereals, breads, crackers, rice, or pasta every day. Make sure that ingredient lists on the products you buy describe grains such as wheat, rice, oats, etc. as "whole grain."
- **Fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables.** Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables each day. Remember to include dark green, red, and orange vegetables because these are the healthiest choices.



- **Switch to fat-free or low-fat milk.** Adding low-fat milk products, such as yogurt, milk, and cheese to your diet will help you get the calcium you need without the extra calories. If you're lactose-intolerant, use lactose-free milk or soy milk products fortified with calcium.
- **Choose a variety of proteins.** Include lean meats, beans, soy products, nuts, and a variety of seafood in your diet. Replace high-fat proteins (like red meat) with lower-fat protein options like fish or tofu. Avoid processed meats, like pepperoni, bacon, and sausage, which are high in fat and salt.
- **Replace solid fats with oils.** When possible, use oils (like olive or canola vegetable oil) instead of solid fats (like butter, Crisco, or lard).



Guideline 3: Foods to Reduce.

Reduce the amount of foods you eat that are high in:

- Sodium (salt)
- Saturated fat and trans fat
- Added sugars
- Cholesterol

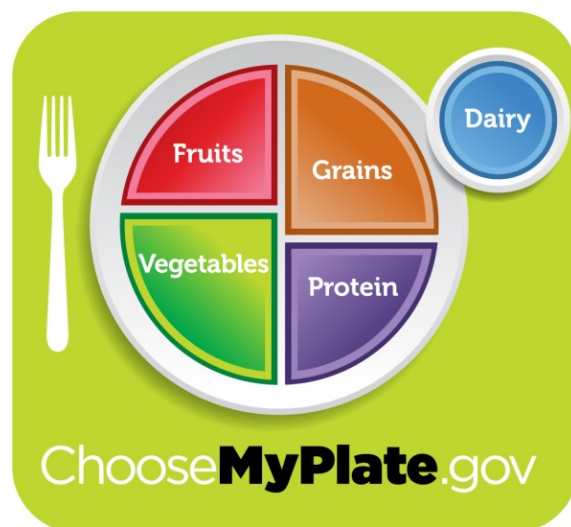
Getting Started

Most active adults can maintain their weight by eating between 1,800 and 2,400 calories per day. If you are sedentary or use a wheelchair you may need fewer daily calories. Here are three steps to help you get started on a weight management plan.

Step 1. Log on to the USDA [ChooseMyPlate.gov](https://www.choosemyplate.gov) website. Use the [MyPlate Daily Food Plan](#) tool to find out how many servings you should get each day from the five food groups.

Step 2. Track what you eat each day using the [Food Tracker](#). This will help keep you from getting too many calories, or too many servings in some food groups and not enough servings in others.

Step 3. Keep tracking what and how much you eat. Make changes to reach a more balanced diet. If you are eating a balanced diet and still gaining unwanted weight, you may need to decrease your number of servings in each food group. You may also want to consult a dietician. If you need help finding a dietician, call 1-800-900-8086 for an information specialist at the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD).



Strategies for Healthy Eating

Here are some additional suggestions for making good dietary choices.

Stay hydrated. Your body needs a lot of fluids to perform well. Water helps control your body temperature and blood pressure. It also helps you digest food and remove waste and toxins from your body. Drinking enough water is also good for controlling your appetite. When you don't drink enough water, you are more likely to feel tired during the day. Try to avoid drinks like coffee or soda because they often contain caffeine and sugar. Both caffeine and sugar can make you dehydrated.

Control your portions. Pay attention to how much you eat. It's easy to overeat if you use big bowls and plates, eat at restaurants, or fill your dinner plate. Today's portions are larger than they used to be. Don't fool yourself into thinking you eat less than you really do. Measure your servings if you're unsure of how much to eat. See what one cup of bran flakes really looks like. Practice taking smaller helpings. If you're still hungry, give yourself permission to take seconds, but remember grandma's rule: "Eat all your vegetables before you take seconds." If you need help figuring out serving

sizes print out the [Food Group Serving Chart](#) at [ChooseMyPlate.gov](#) for easy reference.

Eat slowly and pay attention. It helps to eat slowly. You are more likely to overeat when you eat quickly because your brain doesn't have time to register that you are "full." Also, it's harder to notice that you're full if you watch television while you eat. When you concentrate on eating, it helps you recognize when your body is satisfied.

Include social supports. Asking your family and friends for support can increase your chances of sticking to a new diet. Maybe a friend or family member will want to work with you to change their eating habits. If people close to you eat large amounts of high-fat, high-calorie foods, however, you might need to avoid eating with them. If you are serious about changing your eating habits, ask for support from people who eat well.



Keep moving. Combining a healthy diet with regular physical activity is the best way to reach and maintain a healthy weight. For example, the combination of a diet high in fiber and exercise will help keep your intestinal tract working well. The combination of protein and exercise will build muscle.

Wash your food. Fresh foods like fruits and vegetables are good for you. Unfortunately, many fresh foods have chemicals on them that are not good for you. It is important to wash fruits, vegetables, and legumes with cold water before you eat or cook them.

Healthy eating on a tight budget. Sometimes, people feel that eating well costs too much. There are several ways to get nutritious food on a tight budget. Here are a few tips from the USDA on shopping for fruits and vegetables:

- Buy seasonal fruits, such as melons and peaches in summer, oranges in winter, and apples and pears in fall.
- Look for sales and specials, and use coupons.
- Stick to your grocery list and don't shop hungry!
- Buy canned or frozen fruits and vegetables. For canned goods, choose fruits canned with 100% fruit juice and vegetables with little salt added. Or, rinse canned fruits and vegetables well to remove excess salt and sugar.
- Buy small amounts of fresh foods frequently so they do not go to waste.
- Buy in bulk when items are on sale. This is an especially good idea for canned and frozen items that will last longer.
- Buy fruits and vegetables in their natural form (like whole apples or a head of lettuce). Pre-cut, pre-washed foods are generally more expensive.
- Plant your own garden.
- Prepare and freeze soups, stews, or other meals in advance. Use leftover fruits for smoothies or baking. Use leftover vegetables to make casseroles or soups.



A few more tips to try:

- Look for healthy bargains, such as day-old whole wheat products.
- Buy brown rice, whole grain cereal, oatmeal, dried legumes, and whole wheat pasta in bulk or in large bags.
- Prepare your own food instead of buying frozen, instant, flavored, or prepared meals.
- Buy larger containers (gallons instead of quarts) of products such as low-fat milk if you have the storage space and can use it before it spoils.
- Buy meat on sale and freeze it.
- Buy whole chickens and cut them up yourself.

**Additional Resources****USDA's MyPlate**

The USDA [ChooseMyPlate.gov](https://www.choosemyplate.gov) website is full of information to help you develop a healthy diet. For instance, there is a menu planner, a food tracker, and a food encyclopedia. There are also tips for eating out and vegetarian diets. The website has many different interactive tools to help you develop a diet that is good for you.

Set a Goal

Setting a health behavior change goal can move you closer to achieving and maintaining meaningful employment.

When setting a goal to change your eating habits, it is important to be realistic. Think about where you are now, and then think about where

you want to be. Begin by making a few changes to your diet, and work up to your goal from there. Remember to keep track of your progress and reward yourself for accomplishments along the way.



Good Luck!

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