

What is healthy eating?

Healthy eating means having enough healthy food and drinks in your diet, but not eating too much. It also means eating a wide variety of healthy foods and avoiding unhealthy foods and drinks.

Your diet provides the energy your body requires to do all the things it needs to do — like breathing, pumping blood, thinking, healing, fighting infections and moving around. The energy in your diet comes from macronutrients — proteins, fats, carbohydrates, fibre, organic acids and alcohol — and the right balance of these is needed to keep you healthy.

Your diet might provide more than your body needs to function well, or things it doesn't need at all, which can result in health problems. For example, excess energy in your diet can be converted to fat that causes obesity, or alcohol can cause damage to your liver and other organs.

There's no one-size-fits-all diet that is suitable for everyone. Many people have health conditions that affect the foods they can eat. You may need to seek individualised advice from an [Accredited Practising Dietitian](#) or your doctor to match your diet to your health needs.

What is a balanced diet?

The [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#) provide advice about the amounts and types of foods that you should eat for a balanced diet to help you stay healthy. They are based on scientific evidence about the nutrient and energy needs of people at different ages and stages of life.

The [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#) recommend:

- 45-65% of energy should come from [carbohydrates](#). Sources of carbohydrates include cereals and grains, bread and pasta, fruits, vegetables and dairy foods. Some foods that are high in carbohydrates (e.g. grains, vegetables) also provide fibre, which helps to keep your gut healthy. Your body digests carbohydrates into sugars, like glucose, which enter the bloodstream and are taken up by the body's cells to generate energy
- 15-20% of energy should come from [proteins](#). Protein sources include animal products such as meat, fish, eggs, dairy, nuts, legumes (e.g. beans, lentils) and tofu. The structure of your body — its bones, muscles, skin and organs — is built using protein, and many biochemical processes in your body depend on proteins
- 20-35% of total energy intake should come from [fats](#). Sources of fat include oils, butter and other dairy foods, meat, oily fish (like sardines, anchovies and salmon), nuts and seeds. Your body needs fats for things like making hormones and normal cell function

Macronutrients from different food sources are not all the same. For example, unprocessed foods provide carbohydrates in a healthier form than highly processed foods, and a [Mediterranean-style diet](#) with around 40% fat (mainly from plants and fish) [may be better](#) for your health than a diet with 30% fat from other sources (like dairy and red meats).

Which foods, and how much of them, should I eat?

The Australian Dietary Guidelines break down a healthy diet into five food groups and recommend the number of servings from each group you should eat each day. The five food groups, and examples of one serve, are:

Vegetables and legumes (beans, peas, pulses)

- 1 serve equals:
 - ½ cup of cooked vegetables or legumes
 - 1 cup of raw leafy vegetables or salad
 - 1 medium (100g) potato
 - 1 medium tomato

Fruit

- 1 serve equals:
 - 1 apple, banana or pear
 - 2 apricots, kiwis or plums
 - 1 cup of diced fruit

Grains and cereals

- 1 serve equals:
 - 1 slice of bread, 1 crumpet or ½ a bread roll
 - 1 cup of cooked rice, pasta, noodles or pulses (e.g. barley, quinoa, polenta)
 - ¼ cup of muesli, ½ a cup of porridge or 2/3 of a cup of wheat cereal flakes

Meat, chicken, fish and other sources of protein (e.g. tofu, nuts, eggs, legumes)

- 1 serve equals:
 - 65g of cooked red meat (90-100g raw)
 - 80g cooked chicken (100g raw)
 - 100g cooked fish (115g raw)
 - 2 eggs
 - 1 cup of cooked legumes (e.g. lentils, chickpeas)
 - 170g tofu

- 30g nuts or seeds

Dairy foods (e.g. milk, cheese, yoghurt)

- 1 serve equals:
 - 1 cup of cow's milk or plant-based milk with added calcium (100mg/100 ml)
 - 40g of cheddar cheese
 - ¾ cup of yoghurt

What should adults eat each day?

In servings:

Men age group	Vegetables	Fruit	Grains and cereals	Protein
19-50 years	6	2	6	3
51-70 years	5.5	2	6	2.5
70+ years	5	2	4.5	2.5

What should babies eat?

For most babies, breast milk or infant formula is the only food they need for the first six months after birth.☐

At six months of age, breastmilk or formula should be supplemented by other foods (such as iron-enriched cereals and pureed food). By 12 months of age, children should be eating a wide variety of foods from the five food groups.☐

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What should children eat each day?

In servings:

Boy age group	Vegetables	Fruit	Grains and cereals	Protein
2-3 years	2.5	1	4	1
4-8 years	4.5	1.5	4	1.5
9-11 years	5	2	5	2.5
12-13 years	5.5	2	6	2.5
14-18 years	5.5	2	7	2.5

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What should I drink?

Your body is mainly made of water, and it needs water to function properly. You lose water from sweating, breathing and urinating, so you need to replace it. You get some water from the food you eat, but the best way to replenish the water you lose is by drinking water. All drinks provide water but the other things they contain (e.g. caffeine, sugar, flavours, alcohol) are unnecessary and potentially harmful.

The amount you need to drink depends on things like your age, sex, size, body composition, level of activity and your environment. Recommended amounts of fluid (from water and other drinks) are:

Boys aged 1-3

- 1 litre/day

Boys aged 4-8

- 1.2 litres/day

Boys aged 9-13

- 1.6 litres/day

Boys aged 14-18

- 1.9 litres/day

Men aged 19 and over

- 2.6 litres/day

Which foods should I avoid?

Around [one-third of the energy intake of Australians comes from unnecessary foods](#) that have high levels of things that are bad for you if you have too much (e.g. sugar, unhealthy fats, salt) and low levels of what we need (e.g. healthy fats, fibre, protein).

Unnecessary foods include:

- Biscuits, cakes, pastries
- Ice cream
- Lollies
- Chocolate
- Pies, sausage rolls
- Processed meats
- Burgers, hot chips
- Potato chips
- Sugary drinks (cordial, soft drink, sports drinks, flavoured milk, some juices)

- Alcohol

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend that unnecessary foods should be eaten only sometimes and in small amounts.

How common is healthy eating?

Very few Australians have diets that meet the Australian Dietary Guidelines. These percentages indicate how many men and boys eat enough of:

Male age group	Vegetables	Fruit	Grains and cereals	
2-3 years	1%	80%	26%	16%
4-8 years	0%	62%	58%	<1%
9-11 years	<1%	41%	49%	3.5%
12-13 years	<1%	34%	35%	4%
14-18 years	<1%	26%	23%	15%
19-50 years	2%	26%	35%	18%
51-70 years	5%	33%	25%	30%
71+ years	8%	40%	52%	16%

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Eating and health

Unhealthy eating is responsible for 6.6% of the burden of disease that affects Australian men and boys, costing [more than 170,000 years of healthy life](#) (for comparison, tobacco smoking is responsible for 9.2% of total burden of disease in Australian males and a lack of physical activity is responsible for 2.4%).

Specific dietary factors and their [contributions to total disease burden](#) in men and boys are:

- Diet low in legumes – 1.6 %
- Diet high in sodium – 1.2 %
- Diet low in whole grains and high fibre cereals – 1.1 %
- Diet high in red meat – 1 %
- Diet low in fruit – 1 %
- Diet low in nuts and seeds – 0.9 %
- Diet low in vegetables – 0.7 %
- Diet high in processed meat – 0.4 %
- Diet low in polyunsaturated fats – 0.1%

- Diet high in sugar sweetened drinks – 0.1 %
- Diet low in fish and seafood – 0.1 %
- Diet low in milk – 0.1 %

Alcohol consumption is responsible for an additional [6.1% of the burden of disease in Australian males](#).

Unhealthy eating contributes a lot to [many health problems in men and boys](#), including:

- 52.1% of the health cost of coronary heart disease
- 27.6% of the health cost of stroke
- 26.4% of the health cost of type 2 diabetes
- 26.3% of the health cost of bowel cancer
- 22.8% of the health cost of oesophageal cancer
- 9.2% of the health cost of heart disease from high blood pressure

Following the Australian Dietary Guidelines is one of the most important things you can do to lower your risk of these diseases. Your diet can also affect your [fertility](#), and there are links between [fathers' nutrition and the health of their children](#).

Eating disorders in men and boys

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that can affect anyone at any time in their life. Around [one-third of Australians with an eating disorder are male](#).¹

[Body dysmorphic disorder](#) is different from an eating disorder, but both may occur in some people.

What should I do about healthy eating?

[Suggestions for how to start eating in a healthier way](#) include:

- Start with something easy — snack on a carrot rather than potato chips
- Go big — if you want to decrease the amount of sugar you eat, cut out the major sources, like dessert or soft drinks, rather than worrying about how much sugar is in things that you only have in small amounts or not very often, like salad dressings or sauces.
- Add rather than subtract — include an extra vegetable with dinner. Filling up with healthy food leave less room for unnecessary food
- [Reduce your portion sizes](#) — rather than eat straight from a big packet of chips, put a serve into a bowl and put the packet away
- Drink water — having a glass of water before meals will help you feel full and less hungry

- Eat at the table, focusing on your food (rather than a screen) can help you to recognise when you're full

What questions should I ask my doctor about healthy eating?

- Can you help me to set goals and track my success in eating in a healthier way?
- What aspects of my health will improve if I eat better?
- Which part of my diet should I focus on to help me eat in a healthier way?
- Could changing my diet reduce my need for medication?

Email these questions to yourself to take into your doctor's appointment.

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