

Diet and health (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

Why is it important to eat a healthy diet? — It's important to eat a healthy diet because eating the right foods can keep you healthy now and later on in life.

Which foods are especially healthy? — Foods that are especially healthy include:

- Fruits and vegetables — Eating fruits and vegetables can help prevent heart disease and strokes. Eating them might also help prevent certain types of cancers. Try to eat fruits and vegetables at each meal and for snacks. If you don't have fresh fruits and vegetables, you can eat frozen or canned ones instead. Doctors recommend eating 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day.
- Foods with fiber — Eating foods with a lot of fiber can help prevent heart disease and strokes. If you have type 2 diabetes, it can also help control your blood sugar. Foods that have a lot of fiber include vegetables, fruits, beans, nuts, oatmeal, and some breads and cereals. You can tell how much fiber is in a food by reading the nutrition label ([figure 1](#)). Doctors recommend eating 20 to 35 grams of fiber each day.
- Foods with folate (also called [folic acid](#)) — Folate is a vitamin that is important for pregnant women and women who plan to get pregnant. Pregnant women need to get enough folate so that their unborn baby can grow normally. Folate is found in many breakfast cereals, oranges, orange juice, and green leafy vegetables.
- Foods with calcium and vitamin D — Babies, children, and adults need calcium and vitamin D to help keep their bones strong. Adults also need calcium and vitamin D to help prevent osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a condition that causes bones to get thin and break more easily than usual. Different foods and drinks have calcium and vitamin D in them ([figure 2](#)). People who don't get enough calcium and vitamin D in their diet might need to take a supplement. Supplements are pills, capsules, liquids, or tablets that have nutrients in them.

What about fats? — There are different types of fats. Some types of fats are better for your body than others. Unhealthy fats are:

- Trans fats — These are found in margarines, many fast foods, and some store-bought baked goods.
- Saturated fats — These are found in red meats, butter, and many cheeses.

Both trans fats and saturated fats can raise your cholesterol level and your chance of getting heart disease. Try to avoid eating foods with these types of fats.

Healthier fats are:

- Monounsaturated fats
- Polyunsaturated fats

When you cook, use oils with these healthier fats, such as olive oil and canola oil.

What about alcohol? — People who drink a small amount of alcohol each day might have a lower chance of getting heart disease. But drinking alcohol can lead to problems. For example, it can raise a person's chances of getting liver disease and certain types of cancers.

Most doctors recommend that adult women not have more than 1 drink a day and that adult men not have more than 2 drinks a day.

How many calories do I need each day? — The number of calories you need each day depends on your weight, height, age, sex, and how active you are.

Your doctor or nurse can tell you how many calories you should eat each day. If you are trying to lose weight, you should eat fewer calories each day.

What if I have questions? — If you have questions about which foods you should or should not eat, ask your doctor or nurse. The right diet for you will depend, in part, on your health and any medical conditions you have.