

Nutrition Guideline

Planning Healthy Meals and Snacks

For Professional Reference Only

Applicable to: Nurses, Physicians and Other Health Professionals

Recommendations

- Plan ahead for healthy meals to achieve a healthy eating pattern.
- Make a grocery list and use it to purchase healthy foods.
- Pack healthy meals and snacks to ensure that better choices are available away from home.
- Make healthy choices when eating out.

Health Benefits

Planning and eating healthy meals and snacks following Canada's Food Guide can help to:

- Promote optimal growth and development in children and adolescents.¹
- Reduce the risk of nutrient-related chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease (CVD), type 2 diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis, obesity and certain cancers.¹
- Promote overall health for individuals of all ages¹

How can an individual meal plan according to Canada's Food Guide?

Key concepts to consider for healthy meal planning include: planning, purchasing, preparing, and packing healthy meals and snacks.

Plan

- Make plans to eat healthier.
- Make a menu for a few days of meals, or for a week. Include daily meals and the family's activities such as swimming lessons, soccer practice, or playing in the park.
- Begin with planning supper meals. Plan for simpler meals on busy days.
- Make extra for supper so that leftovers can become next day's lunches.
- Make meal planning a family affair. Involving children in food preparation will increase their interest in healthy foods.
- Place healthier food and drink choices where they can be seen.

Purchase

- Create a grocery list using a menu plan. Check cupboards and freezer for items already on hand.
- Schedule a time in the weekly menu plan to go grocery shopping. At least one hour should be allotted for shopping.
- Shop around the edges of the store first as this is where the four food groups of Canada's Food Guide are found: Vegetables and Fruits, Grain Products, Milk and Alternatives, and Meat and Alternatives.
- It is important to read labels; choose foods higher in fibre, and lower in fat, sugar, and salt.

Prepare

- Using a weekly menu, begin preparing meals the night before. Use leftovers, defrost meats, and have recipes set out on the counter.
- Ensure ingredients are on hand to prepare healthy meals.
- Use crock pots, rice cookers, and microwave ovens to save time.

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- Ask family and friends for help preparing meals. Older children can start on the supper when they get home from school using the recipe that has been set out. After supper, younger children can help set the table, and lay out breakfast and lunch supplies for the next day.
- Have washed and cut-up vegetables and fruit ready any time for snacks and meals.
- Make a batch of muffins; freeze them for quick snacks.
- Prepare foods with little or no added fat, sugar, or salt.

Pack

- Stock a cupboard with supplies such as food containers, plastic baggies, beverage containers, cutting boards, and utensils.
- Keep take-along foods together. For example, in the fridge keep containers for washed and cut-up vegetables, homemade dips, leftovers, deli meats, breads, and condiments.
- Pack lunches for the next day right after supper; involve the whole family.
- Freeze juice boxes, milk containers, or ice packs to keep foods cold.
- For extra busy nights, pack the car with low-fat granola bars, a cold pack with fruit, vegetables and dips, and yogurt.

What types of food should be included when planning meals and snacks?

Individuals should plan to include a variety of foods from all four Food Groups of Canada's Food Guide, including:¹

- vegetables and fruit prepared with little or no added fat, sugar or salt
- grain products that are lower in fat, sugar, or salt, including a variety of whole grains
- milk and milk alternatives that are lower in fat
- meat alternatives such as beans, lentils, and tofu often
- lean meat and alternatives prepared with little or no added fat or salt.

Individuals should also plan to drink adequate amounts of healthy fluids for proper hydration.

- For adults: Choose water, lower fat milk, and calorie-free beverages more often.²
- For children: Choose milk and water more often. Limit juice to 100% juice, maximum ½ cup (125 mL) a day. Avoid artificial sweeteners.³

Refer to Guideline: General Healthy Eating for Children and Adults

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What food items should be stocked at home to prepare quick and easy meals?

Individuals can plan ahead to keep their fridge, cupboards, and freezer stocked with food items like those below. These foods can help make meal preparation quick and easy.

Vegetables and fruit

- Vegetables, fresh, frozen, or no-salt-added canned
- Vegetable juice, low sodium
- Fruit, fresh, frozen, or canned
- Low sodium canned soup with vegetables
- Fruit juice
- Tomato sauce or paste
- Fruit leather, 100% fruit, no sugar

Milk and Alternatives

- Milk, fresh or non-refrigerated in a TetraPak®
- Evaporated milk, low fat
- Yogurt
- Cheese
- Milk puddings
- Skim milk powder
- Fortified almond, rice, or soy milk, non-refrigerated in a TetraPak®

Grain Products

- Cold cereals
- Bulgur
- Dry uncooked hot cereals
- Couscous, quinoa
- Whole grain breads, roti, wraps, and crackers
- Whole grain noodles and pasta
- Rice (brown, black, wild)
- Barley

Meat and Alternatives

- Baked beans
- Pea, bean, or lentil soups
- Chicken, ham, fish (fresh, frozen, or canned)
- Tofu
- Nuts and nut butters
- Dried or canned lentils, split peas, and beans (kidney, navy, black beans, chick peas)

How many meals and snacks should an individual plan for each day?

To help achieve healthy eating:

- For adults: Eat three regular meals, plus snacks if needed, throughout the day.
- For children: Provide three regular meals and two to three snacks every day.^{4,5}

Snacks should include foods from the four food groups of Canada's Food Guide to help individuals meet their recommended servings.

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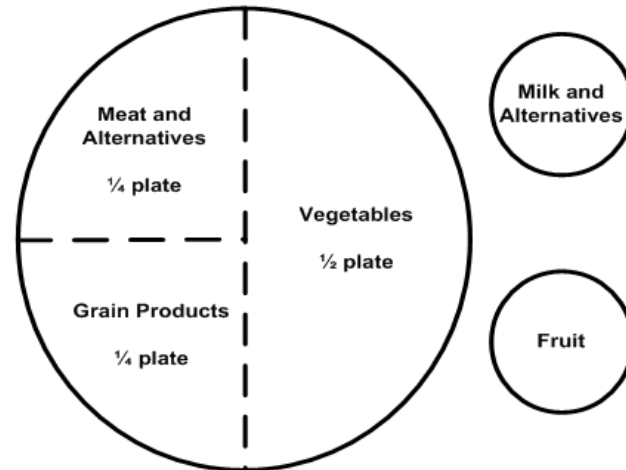
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What does a healthy meal look like?

A healthy meal will include one food from at least three of the four food groups from Canada's Food Guide.²

To build a healthy meal:

- fill $\frac{1}{2}$ of the plate with Vegetables
- fill $\frac{1}{4}$ of the plate with Meat and Alternatives
- fill $\frac{1}{4}$ of the plate with Grain Products
- have 1 serving of Milk and Alternatives
- have fruit on the side



A healthy meal will help with portion control and meeting recommended servings from the four food groups.

Refer to Guideline: General Healthy Eating for Children and Adults

What is a healthy portion size?

A **portion** is the amount of food an individual eats at a time or at one sitting. When individuals are given a larger portion of food, they are likely to eat more. These larger portions can contribute to weight gain.

Healthy portions help an individual meet the recommended servings from the four food groups of Canada's Food Guide. The serving sizes in the Food Guide are examples of healthy portions. Becoming familiar with Canada's Food Guide and the serving sizes for various foods will allow individuals to better manage the portions they consume.

Refer to Guideline: Portion Sizes

What are examples of healthy snacks?

Healthy snacks should include foods from Canada's Food Guide.

Examples of healthy snacks include:

- Fresh fruit or individually packed containers of cut-up fruit
- Raw vegetables including carrots, peppers, zucchini, cherry, or grape tomatoes
- Baby carrots and whole wheat pita triangles with hummus
- Pumpernickel bagel with peanut butter and banana
- Fresh, frozen, or canned fruit topped with low fat yogurt
- A smoothie or blender drink made with fruit, yogurt, and milk.

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- Sweet red, yellow, or green peppers and bread sticks with salad dressing or low fat dip
- Whole wheat tortilla wrap made with salmon or tuna and salad dressing, onions, celery and green peppers
- Mini pizza made with a whole grain English muffin or pita, topped with tomato sauce, vegetables, and cheese
- Mixed dry cereal and a container of milk
- Dark green leafy salad with orange sections and almonds
- Small handful of unsalted nuts, pumpkin, or sunflower seeds
- Popsicles made with 100% fruit juice or yogurt
- Water, milk, fortified soy beverage or 100% fruit juice (limit juice to ½ cup (125 mL) per day)

Can eating out in restaurants still be healthy?

Restaurant food portions are large, and tend to be high in calories, fat, sugar, and salt. Therefore, individuals should limit the frequency of eating out.

Eating out can be made healthier by choosing menu items and portion sizes that align with guidelines for healthy eating.

Refer to Guidelines: Eating Out; General Healthy Eating for Children and Adults

Are there any handouts on planning healthy meals and snacks that I can use with my clients?

Refer to approved provincial Alberta Health Services nutrition handouts to support patient education. For more information, contact Nutrition.Resources@albertahealthservices.ca

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References

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- ⁴ Government of Alberta. Healthy U. Healthy Eating and Active Living for Your 1 to 4 year old [document on the internet]. 2012. [cited: 2012 Dec 4] Available from: http://www.healthyalberta.com/Documents/23283_HEAL_1_to_4_2012_web.pdf
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