
Eating a Balanced Diet

When your healthcare provider tells you to “eat a balanced diet,” you may feel unsure about what this means. Fortunately, eating well doesn’t need to be confusing. There are foundational features of a balanced diet you can implement to eat well while navigating your food preferences, cultural eating patterns, and health goals. This guide shows you actionable steps you can take to build a healthy, balanced diet.

What Is a Balanced Diet?

A balanced diet provides macronutrients to meet energy needs and supplies essential micronutrients for health. **Macronutrients** are nutrients required in large amounts to provide calories and maintain your body’s systems. The three macronutrients are protein, carbohydrate, and fat.

Micronutrients are required in small amounts for proper development and healthy body function. They include vitamins and minerals.

Though not required for basic body functions, **phytonutrients** are an essential part of a balanced diet. These compounds in plant foods protect plants from pests and stressors and offer health benefits when consumed.¹

A balanced diet should also reflect your food preferences, cultural foods and eating patterns, health concerns, and health goals.

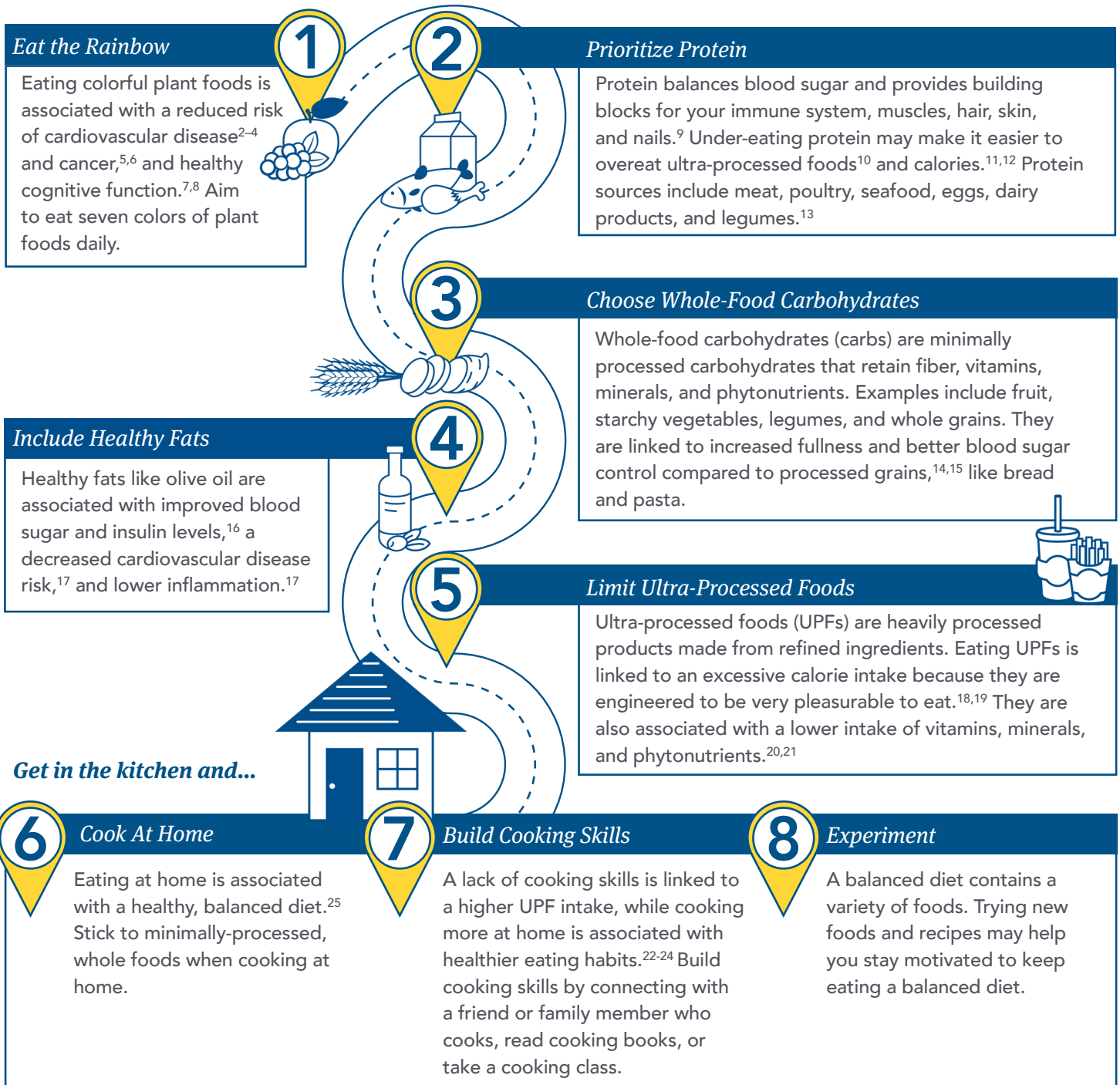
There’s No Such Thing as a “One-Size-Fits-All” Diet

There is not a single way of eating that works for everyone. A balanced diet for a person with type 2 diabetes who is sedentary looks different from a balanced diet for a pregnant woman or an athlete. However, there are key features of a balanced diet that can support your health regardless of your current health conditions, body size, activity level, culture, and health goals.

The following roadmap shows you the steps you can take to build a balanced, healthy diet.

Your Roadmap to a Balanced Diet

Building and sticking with a healthy, balanced diet is a journey. The following six "signposts" provide a roadmap for staying on course with eating a balanced diet.



There are many Types of Balanced Diets

Traditional diets represent specific cultural eating patterns consumed for generations that contain mostly whole foods. Examples of balanced traditional diets include:

- **The Nordic Diet:** Features rye, barley, oats, berries, fatty cold-water fish, and root vegetables. It is associated with reduced risks of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.²⁶
- **Traditional Japanese Diet:** Features seafood and soybean products, rice, and other plant-based foods. It is associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease.²⁷
- **Mediterranean Diet:** Features vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, seafood, lean proteins, and olive oil. It is associated with improved blood sugar control²⁸ and a reduced risk of cognitive decline.²⁹

Balanced traditional eating patterns from Central and South America, Africa, and Asia are also associated with potential health benefits.³⁰

Cultivate a Flexible Food Mindset

Part of eating a balanced diet is being flexible and relaxing your rules and restrictions around food. Being too restrictive may lead to the development of disordered eating patterns. Orthorexia, a disordered eating pattern that involves an obsession with healthy eating, is associated with an increased risk of malnutrition, loss of relationships, and reduced quality of life.³¹

Keep wiggle room in your diet and give yourself permission to indulge occasionally without guilt, shame, or stress about your food choices.

Build a Social Support Network

Social support is linked to healthier eating habits.^{32,33} Connect with family or friends who are interested in healthy eating to share recipes, plan a potluck, go grocery shopping together, or simply hold each other accountable.

Consider Goal Setting and Habits

For many people, staying on track with eating a healthy, balanced diet is the hardest part! This is where setting goals can be helpful. There is no perfect method for goal setting. Here are a few options to consider:

- **Set a small, attainable goal.** A small goal, such as swapping out your breakfast cereal made with added sugars and artificial colors for a whole grain breakfast cereal, can help you ease into healthier eating habits.
- **Set a big, exciting goal.** Some people thrive on setting a big goal that excites them. The motivation and passion behind big goals can help some people stay on track better than a small goal.
- **Focus on daily habits.** For some people, focusing on daily habits works better than focusing on goals. For example, focusing on the habit of walking 10,000 steps daily could lead to many positive health outcomes that are not captured by a single goal.

Qualified nutrition professionals often have training in behavior change and can help you build the habits and take the steps needed to begin and maintain a balanced diet. Some nutrition professionals work alongside health coaches who provide behavior change support that complements the nutrition professionals' skills.

Partner with a Qualified Nutrition Professional

While this roadmap is a great place to start, there are many nutritional and health factors to consider when tailoring your diet to achieve your goals. A qualified nutrition professional can help you optimize your diet and build the habits needed to make healthy dietary changes for life.

Eating a balanced diet is essential for your health, but it is often easier said than done. However, by incorporating the eight principles of a healthy, balanced diet, you can eat well without rigid rules. You will build a solid foundation that you can further personalize with the guidance of a nutrition professional.

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