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How Much Should I Eat? Quantity and Quality

Figuring out how much to eat while achieving or maintaining a healthy weight can be difficult. Getting the proper nutrients and eating the right amount for your weight and activity level can contribute to healthy aging. This article provides suggestions for how older adults can get the nutrients they need within a recommended daily number of calories.

How many calories do you need?

A calorie is a unit of measurement that describes how much energy is released when your body breaks down food. Although calorie count alone does not dictate whether a food is nutritious, thinking about how many calories you need can guide healthy eating habits. If you are over age 60 and you want to maintain your current weight, how many calories do you need to eat each day? The Dietary Guidelines suggest:

For a Woman	Calories
Not physically active	1,600
Moderately active	1,800
Active lifestyle	2,000-2,200

For a Man	Calories
Not physically active	2,000-2,200
Moderately active	2,200-2,400
Active lifestyle	2,400-2,600

Unsure which activity category you're in? Consult the Dietary Guidelines for definitions of each level. You can increase your physical activity level by adding walking, jogging, dancing, recreational sports, and other similar approaches to your day.

Serving and portion sizes

A "serving size" is a standard amount of a food, such as a cup or an ounce. Serving sizes can help you when choosing foods and when comparing similar items while shopping, but they are not recommendations for how much of a certain food to eat.

The term "portion" means how much of a food you are served or how much you eat. A portion size can vary from meal to meal. For example, at home you may serve yourself two small pancakes in one portion, but at a restaurant, you may get a stack of four pancakes as one portion. A portion size may also be bigger than a serving size. For example, the serving size on the [nutrition label](#) for your favorite cereal may be 1 cup, but you may actually pour yourself 1½ cups in a bowl.

Portion size can be a problem when eating out. To keep your portion sizes under control, try ordering smaller appetizers instead of an entrée as your meal, or share an entrée with a friend. Or eat just one-half of an entrée and take the rest home to enjoy as a meal the next day.

Healthy food shifts

Eating the right amount is important, but so is making sure you're getting all the nutrients you need. Older adults often need fewer calories, but more nutrients, which makes it essential to eat nutrient-dense foods. To eat nutrient-dense foods across all the [food groups](#), you may need to make some changes in your food and beverage choices. You can move toward a [healthier eating pattern](#) by making shifts in food choices over time. Here are some ideas:

Shift from: ## Shift to:

High-calorie snacks   **Nutrient-dense snacks**

Fruit products with added sugars   **Fresh fruit**

Refined grains   **Whole grains**
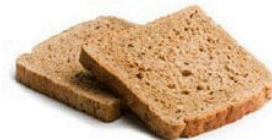
Snacks with added salt or sugars   **Snacks without added salt or sugars**
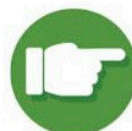
Solid fats   **Oils**

Check out these tips for planning healthy meals as you get older.

Healthy beverage shifts

It's easy to forget about calories you consume from beverages. If you drink sodas, creamy and sweet coffee drinks, or alcohol, swapping them out for healthier options can make a huge difference. There are plenty of beverage options that are low in added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium. Here are some options:

Shift from:

Medium café latte made with whole milk

Shift to:
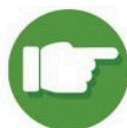
Small café latte made with fat-free milk

Regular cola
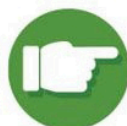
Water or water flavored with fruits or vegetables

Sweetened lemon iced tea

Sparkling water with natural lemon flavor

100-calorie snacks

Another way to think about the idea of nutrient-dense and calorie-dense foods is to look at a variety of foods that all provide the same calories. Let's say that you wanted to have a small snack. You might choose:

- A 7- or 8-inch banana
- 20 peanuts
- 3 cups low-fat popcorn
- Two regular chocolate-sandwich cookies
- 1/2 cup low-fat ice cream
- One scrambled large egg cooked with oil
- 2 ounces baked chicken breast with no skin

These choices all have about 100 calories but provide different amounts of nutrients. The right choice for you may depend on what else you're eating throughout the day.

5 Tips for Choosing Healthier Foods as You Age

Eating healthy is not just about how much you eat, it's also about what you eat. Older adults should try to eat foods that are packed with nutrients while limiting foods that are high in calories but provide few nutrients. Swapping out snacks and beverages with nutrient-dense alternatives can help you get the nutrients you need while staying within your recommended number of calories.

[Read and share this infographic](#) to learn about making healthier food choices as you age.

You may also be interested in

- Exploring different [meal plans as you age](#)
- Learning how [to read food labels](#)
- Finding out more about [calorie restrictions](#)

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