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Healthy meals start with planning

By [Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Your healthy meal plan is ready. Grocery shopping for nutritious food is done. But when you're ready to fill your plate, how much is too much?

A plan for healthy eating includes knowing how much food your body needs. And then eating that amount, no more and no less. Two measurements can help you do this: serving size and portion size.

Serving size

A serving is the amount of a food or drink that people typically take in. You'll see the serving size on nutrition labels for packaged food. The label also tells you things like how many calories or grams of fat are in that serving of food.

Fresh food, such as broccoli or meat, has a serving size too. Of course, fresh foods may not have labels, but you often can find out the serving size for these items on the internet.

Portion size

A portion is the amount of a food that you choose to put on your plate or in your cup. For example, a serving size of broccoli is 1 cup. You may choose to dish out a portion size of more than 1 cup.

The portion size that is best for you depends on how many calories and nutrients you need. You can figure out how many calories your body needs based on your weight and activity. Or you can start by measuring portions and tracking food intake to get an idea of baseline calorie intake.

With portion size in mind, you can rethink your plate to fit your specific calorie needs.

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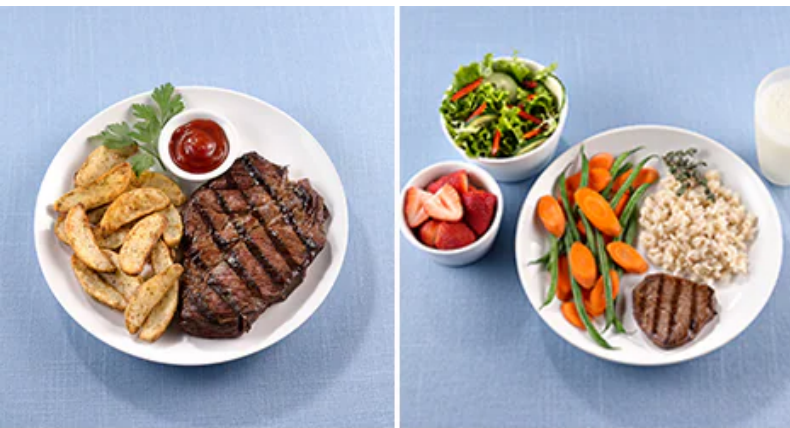
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Here are some examples of how portion size can help you build a healthy plate at every meal.

Variety, the spice of dinner

On the left, there's an image of a restaurant-style meal of steak and starch. The food fills the plate, and many people feel like they're getting their money's worth. But that meal is 1,500 calories and all from only two food groups.

On the right is an image of a steak dinner with more variety. The portions of steak and starch are closer to one serving each. The steak takes up only a fourth of the plate. And the same with the brown rice. Vegetables fill the rest of the plate. Even after adding fruit, salad and skim milk, the whole meal is around 700 calories.



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Lunch with some crunch

On the left, you see a typical restaurant burrito with side sauces. That meal has more than 1,000 calories. It's short on vegetables and fruit. And it's high in fat.

The photo on the right shows a regular-sized burrito made with grilled chicken, fresh veggies and a whole-wheat tortilla. Fresh salsa and avocado slices replace the large portion of guacamole and sour cream, boosting the servings of vegetables. You get all that for less than 750 calories. If you remove the rice, it's less than 500 calories.

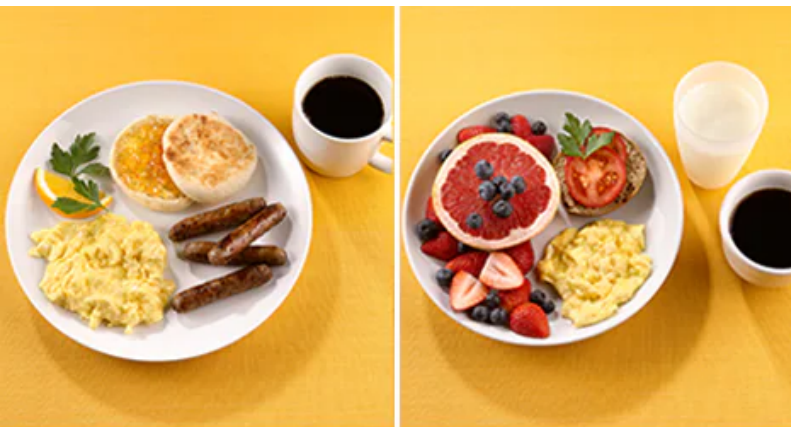


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Brighten breakfast

Eggs, sausage and white toast are a staple on many diner menus. But that's a one-note meal. While strong on protein, the typical diner breakfast, on the left, leaves little room for fruits, vegetables or whole grains. It also adds up. The meal on the left is around 700 calories.

The breakfast pictured on the right is only about 400 calories. It's also a great illustration of the plate method. Half of the plate is fruit, one-fourth is protein and the remaining fourth is whole grain.



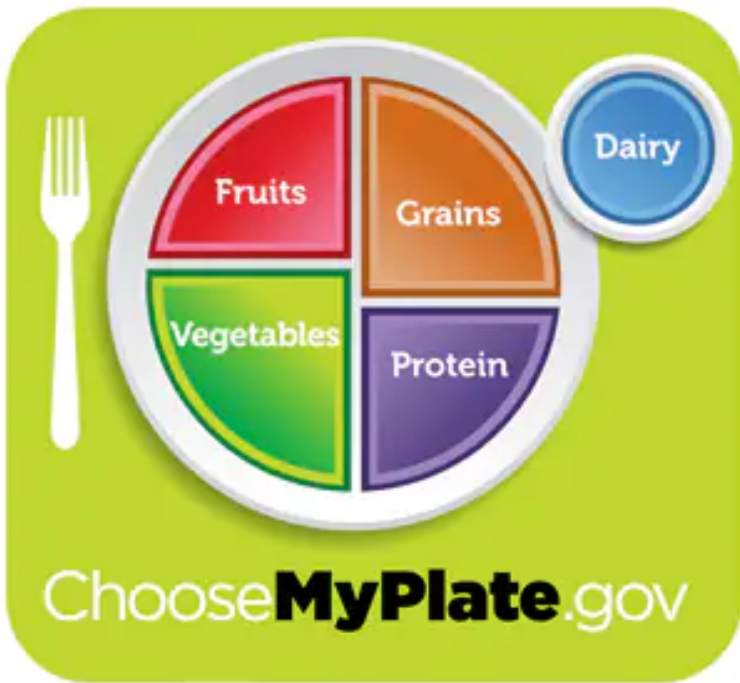
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Plate planning

It all comes back to the plate. Every meal is an opportunity to give your body a wide range of nutrients. And eating a healthy variety of foods, over time and in the right amount for you, is one step toward disease-free living.

To help at mealtime, different organizations have created models for how people might choose to fill their plates. In the United States, a general template calls for half the plate to be fruits and vegetables, and the other half to be protein and grains.

The layout of your plate will depend on how many calories you eat, your age, and physical characteristics such as height, weight and sex. It also depends on how active you are and if you are managing health issues. For example, people managing diabetes may have a model plate that focuses on vegetables and suggests water instead of milk.



FROM U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, 2011

Filling your plate

To get the most benefit for your body, fill your plate with foods that have a lot of nutrients. Go for grains that are less processed.

Choose a wide range of vegetables and fruits. Fill a quarter of your plate with a healthy protein. That could include beans, soy, seafood, and chicken or turkey without the skin. Or choose lean cuts of beef or pork and dairy, including yogurt, milk or cottage cheese.

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