



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
FAQ130  
WOMEN'S HEALTH

## Healthy Eating

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### How can my diet affect my health?

Many health problems in the United States are linked to poor diet and lack of exercise. These include **cardiovascular disease**, **diabetes**, high blood pressure, **osteoporosis**, obesity, constipation, and certain types of cancer. By maintaining a healthy lifestyle that combines good food choices and exercise, many of these conditions can be prevented or controlled.

### What nutrients does my body need to stay healthy?

Your body needs a regular supply of **nutrients** to grow, replace worn-out tissue, and provide energy. The amount of each nutrient you need each day is called the dietary reference intake (DRI). You can get your DRI of nutrients from food as well as from supplements. However, most of the nutrients you need should come from the foods you eat.

To be sure that you are getting enough nutrients, you need to know which ones are in the foods you eat. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's web site "MyPlate" ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)) can help you make healthy food choices.

### Why is it important to get enough calcium?

Bones can become thin and brittle if your diet is low in calcium. This may cause osteoporosis (see the FAQ [Osteoporosis](#)). Most women need 1,000 milligrams (mg) of calcium per day. To get your DRI of calcium, you need to drink about 3 cups of non-fat milk a day. Other dairy foods, such as low-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese, also are high in calcium. If you prefer non-dairy products or you are **lactose intolerant**, consider these sources of calcium:

- Dark greens (collards, spinach, turnip greens, and kale)
- Soybeans and some soy products
- Certain canned fish and seafood (sardines, pink salmon with bone, blue crab, and clams)
- Cereals and juices with added calcium

It also is important to get enough vitamin D, which helps the body to absorb calcium. For this reason, vitamin D often is added to milk. Exposure to sun also can help the body make vitamin D.

### Why is iron important?

If you are not getting enough iron, **anemia** may occur. Women may become anemic because of the loss of blood during menstruation or childbirth. Anemia may make you feel tired. If it becomes severe, it can make you feel weak and look pale.

Most women of childbearing age need 18 mg of iron per day. During and after **menopause**, women may not need such high levels of iron. If you are aged 51 years or older, you need 8 mg of iron per day.

One serving of most breakfast cereals with added iron should provide your DRI of iron. Other foods that are good sources of iron include the following:

- Spinach
- Beans (soybeans, white beans, lentils, kidney beans, chick peas)
- Clams and oysters
- Meats (beef, duck, lamb)
- Organ meats (liver, giblets)

It helps to eat foods rich in vitamin C, like oranges and tomatoes, at the same meal with an iron-rich food. Vitamin C helps your body use iron better.

### Why is folic acid important?

Folic acid is important for all women. It also is needed for healthy growth of a baby during pregnancy, especially during the first months. Not getting enough folic acid in your diet increases the risk of having a baby with certain birth defects of the spine and skull.

Women who can get pregnant or who are pregnant should take 0.4 mg of folic acid daily. Women who have had a child with a spine or skull defect need even higher doses of folic acid (4 mg per day) based on their health care provider's recommendation. The richest food sources of folic acid are those that have it added to them, such as breakfast cereals, bread, pasta, flour, crackers, and orange juice. Other foods that are good sources of folic acid include dark leafy greens (such as spinach and collard greens) and citrus fruit (such as oranges and lemons).

### What is the function of dietary fat and which fats should I choose?

Fat is part of a healthy diet. It is needed to carry vitamins through the body and help manage body functions.

There are two basic kinds of fat found in food—saturated and unsaturated—and one manufactured fat—trans fat. Saturated fat is solid at room temperature. Unsaturated fat is liquid at room temperature. Unsaturated fats are better choices than saturated fats—they do not raise your **cholesterol** levels as much (see the FAQ [Cholesterol and Your Health](#)). Trans fat is made by adding hydrogen to vegetable oils to improve their smell, taste, and shelf life. Trans fat also can increase your cholesterol levels. You should limit or even remove foods that have saturated and trans fats from your diet.

### How does sodium affect my health?

Sodium, or salt, is linked to an increased risk of high blood pressure. Typically, the more salt you eat, the higher your blood pressure gets. That means that salt should be used in small amounts—usually not more than 1 teaspoonful a day.

### What are the types of sugars?

Food sugars—carbohydrates—are the body's main source of energy. Sugars can be natural or added. Natural sugars are those found in fruit, vegetables, and milk. Added sugars are added to the food at the table or during processing at a factory. Besides energy, many natural sugars, especially those from fruit and vegetables, are good sources of fiber. Added sugars supply calories, but few or no nutrients.

### How do calories affect body weight?

Your weight is the result of how many calories you eat versus the number of calories you burn (see the FAQ [Weight Control: Eating Right and Keeping Fit](#)). The energy from food is measured in calories. The number of calories needed each day differs from woman to woman. It depends on your age, how active you are, and your body size. Most women should eat and drink about 2,000 calories per day. Unused calories turn into body fat.

### How can I lose weight in a healthy way if I am overweight?

You can lose weight by balancing your diet with exercise. The more you exercise, the more you can eat without gaining weight. Talk to your health care provider about a weight loss plan that is right for you. The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers the following guidelines:

- To reduce your risk of chronic disease, exercise at least 30 minutes most days of the week.
- To maintain your weight, exercise a total of 60 minutes most days of week and take in fewer calories than you burn.
- To sustain weight loss, exercise a total of 60 to 90 minutes most days of the week and take in fewer calories than you burn.

## Glossary

**Anemia:** Abnormally low levels of blood or red blood cells in the bloodstream. Most cases are caused by iron deficiency, or lack of iron.

**Cardiovascular Disease:** Disease of the heart and blood vessels.

**Cholesterol:** A natural substance that serves as a building block for cells and hormones and helps to carry fat through the blood vessels for use or storage in other parts of the body.

**Diabetes:** A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

**Lactose Intolerant:** Being unable to digest dairy products.

**Menopause:** The process in a woman's life when the ovaries stop functioning and menstruation stops.

**Nutrients:** Nourishing substances supplied through food, such as vitamins and minerals.

**Osteoporosis:** A condition in which the bones become so fragile that they break more easily.

**If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.**

**FAQ130:** Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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