

# Improving Your Diet

When we are depressed, anxious, or overwhelmed by responsibilities, our diet often suffers. Some people overeat. Others don't eat enough. Put this on top of a normal western diet, in which the food choices we make are often poor ones, and you have a recipe for trouble.

Whether an inappropriate diet is a cause or a symptom of difficulties for you, it can have a powerful snowball effect, worsening the problem. Here are some tips on keeping up adequate nutrition during difficult times.

## What to eat

Health Canada distributes the Canada Food Guide as a reasonable rough guide to proper nutrition. It is widely ignored. Obesity is at unacceptable levels, nutritional deficiencies are common in the wealthiest countries on earth, and nutrition-related health problems (such as Type II Diabetes) are rising in incidence.

Many nutritional problems have been linked to depression and other psychological problems. An appropriate diet is a relatively simple and straightforward way of improving your physical and mental health.

Here are the guidelines from the US version: the Food Guide Pyramid. Each category is accompanied by the recommended number of servings per day. A few examples are provided, but there are many other possibilities in most categories.

- **Bread, cereal, rice, and pasta.** 6-11 servings, where a serving represents a slice of bread, an ounce of cereal, or half a cup of cooked cereal, rice, or pasta. These foods are important sources of complex carbohydrates (as opposed to simple carbohydrates like sugar).
- **Vegetables.** 3-5 servings (a cup of raw leafy vegetables, a half-cup of other vegetables,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of vegetable juice). Vegetables include many vital nutrients that are often lacking (in sufficient quantities) in western diets. At least some of your intake should be in the form of dark green leafy vegetables (such as spinach or kale), as these are important sources of some of the B vitamins and other nutrients.
- **Fruits.** 2-4 servings (a medium-sized piece of fruit such as an apple or orange, half a cup of chopped or canned fruit,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of fruit juice). Fruits are good sources of Vitamin C.
- **Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts.** 2-3 servings (2-3 oz. of cooked meat or fish;  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of beans, 1 egg, 2 tablespoons of peanut butter). Many of these foods are particularly good sources of protein, iron, thiamin, riboflavin, and other nutrients.

- **Milk, yogurt, and cheese.** 2-3 servings (1 ½ oz of cheese, a cup of milk or yogurt). Dairy products are good sources of calcium, niacin, riboflavin, and Vitamin B12.
- **Fats, oils, and sweets.** Recommendation: Use sparingly. You need some fats for optimal nutrition, but you are guaranteed to get far, far more than you need in almost any western diet. You may be eating a diet high in unneeded fats and you might still not be getting adequate levels of the essential fatty acids (particularly the omega-3 fatty acids). Canola, olive, and sesame oil are good choices for cooking oils, both for the types of fats they contain and the fatty acids they provide. Animal fats are generally to be avoided.

Which food groups are you not getting enough of? Are there any that you are overusing?

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Keep these particular food groups in mind as you read the tips below.

### **Tips for everyone**

Whether you overeat or undereat when you are distressed, here are some strategies that can help.

- **Eat regular meals.** It is usually easiest to eat (and to control what you eat) if you keep to a routine. Try to have three (or more) set mealtimes per day. Ensure that you have enough food at home for all three.
- **Eat by the clock, not by your stomach.** During times of distress you may lose your appetite, but your body's need for fuel continues anyway. Push yourself to eat at mealtimes regardless of your appetite. At first you may only be able to manage an unsalted cracker for breakfast. Fine. Work your way up from there. If you have been overeating, try to eat only at mealtimes while sitting at the table.
- **Make it easy.** The effort of preparing a meal can be a barrier to getting enough nutrition. The important thing is to eat, not to cook. Buy foods that are easy to prepare (keeping an eye on their nutritional value). Once your energy returns you can go back to more elaborate dishes.

- **Make extra.** You can cut your preparation time by making larger amounts than you need and refrigerating or freezing certain dishes for reheating later.
- **Make it healthy.** Stock up on nutritious food and snacks using the food guidelines above.
- **Watch your sugar intake.** Eating refined sugar can lead to a sharp increase in blood sugar (sometimes experienced as a jittery high) followed by an equally sharp drop (a depressive crash) that can produce a craving for even more sugar. This is an emotional roller coaster you don't need. Limit your intake. Complex carbohydrates (such as those in whole wheat breads or pasta) or low-carbohydrate snacks are generally preferable.

Don't try to "revolutionize" your diet. Revolutions seldom last for long. Which of the above tips seems particularly important or promising based on your own situation? What could you do to put it into action?

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### Special tips for overeaters or binge-eaters

Some people are tempted to overeat during times of difficulty, but the temptation is usually to binge on sugar or fat-rich junk food, never to have a dish of steamed spinach. Some people report that depression (in particular) kills all of their desires, except one: The craving for sugar. Perversely, this is one desire that you shouldn't indulge.

- **Shop after eating.** If you go to the grocery store when you're hungry you are more likely to buy foods that have immediate appeal – like chips or ice cream. It's easier to buy the right foods if you're not distracted by your stomach while you're in the store. If it's not a good idea for you to eat it, don't have it in your home.
- **Buy nutritious snacks.** If you are an uncontrollable snacker, stock up on snacks that won't do you any harm – like celery, baby carrots, or granola.
- **Eat at the table.** Whenever you eat, set a place for yourself at your dining table. No eating while you're doing anything else – standing in the kitchen, reading the paper, watching television. Make eating a completely separate activity and wash the dishes when you're done.

- **Avoid dieting.** If you wish to lose weight, avoid strict diets. These may change your metabolism so that you gain weight even faster when you end the diet. It is much better to adopt healthy (rather than restrictive) eating habits and burn more calories by increasing your physical activity. Also remember that our culture promotes images of unhealthy thinness. Before attempting to lose weight, determine whether you really are too heavy. See your physician for further advice.
- **Consider help.** If binge-eating is a major concern, if you engage in purging (using laxatives or self-induced vomiting to avoid gaining weight), or if you believe that you are too heavy despite being underweight by most standards, seek help. You may have an eating disorder that can contribute to your other difficulties – and that needs special attention.

If you have been overeating, consider putting all of the tips in this section into practice using goal-setting and step-by-step planning. Which would you like to implement first?

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