

## Commonsense Guidelines for Healthy Women

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The challenges of today's busy world make it important for women to make their health a priority, take steps to improve their physical and mental health, and lower their risk for certain diseases. This guide offers commonsense guidelines for good nutrition and health.

### Common Screening Tests

Visit a health care professional to receive regular checkups and preventive screenings. The guidelines listed below are important screening tests for women (see full list at [go.usa.gov/nH9](http://go.usa.gov/nH9)). It is important to work with your health care professional to personalize the timing of these screenings; screenings you may need are based on a variety of factors. Check with your insurance plan to find out which screenings are covered.

Screening tests	18-39	40-49	50-64	65 and older
<b>Blood pressure test</b>	Get tested at least every 2 years if you have normal blood pressure (lower than 120/80).  Get tested once a year if you have blood pressure between 120/80 and 139/89.  Discuss treatment with your doctor or nurse if your blood pressure is 140/90 or higher.	Get tested at least every 2 years if you have normal blood pressure (lower than 120/80).  Get tested once a year if you have blood pressure between 120/80 and 139/89.  Discuss treatment with your doctor or nurse if your blood pressure is 140/90 or higher.	Get tested at least every 2 years if you have normal blood pressure (lower than 120/80).  Get tested once a year if you have blood pressure between 120/80 and 139/89.  Discuss treatment with your doctor or nurse if your blood pressure is 140/90 or higher.	Get tested at least every 2 years if you have normal blood pressure (lower than 120/80).  Get tested once a year if you have blood pressure between 120/80 and 139/89.  Discuss treatment with your doctor or nurse if your blood pressure is 140/90 or higher.
<b>Bone mineral density test</b> (osteoporosis screening)			Discuss with your doctor or nurse if you are at risk of osteoporosis.	Get this test at least once at age 65 or older.  Talk to your doctor or nurse about repeat testing.
<b>Cholesterol test</b>	Starting at age 20, get a cholesterol test regularly if you are at increased risk for heart disease.  Ask your doctor or nurse how often you need your cholesterol tested.	Get a cholesterol test regularly if you are at increased risk for heart disease.  Ask your doctor or nurse how often you need your cholesterol tested.	Get a cholesterol test regularly if you are at increased risk for heart disease.  Ask your doctor or nurse how often you need your cholesterol tested.	Get a cholesterol test regularly if you are at increased risk for heart disease.  Ask your doctor or nurse how often you need your cholesterol tested.

Screening tests	18-39	40-49	50-64	65 and older
<b>Diabetes screening</b>	Get screened for diabetes if your blood pressure is higher than 135/80 or if you take medicine for high blood pressure.	Get screened for diabetes if your blood pressure is higher than 135/80 or if you take medicine for high blood pressure.	Get screened for diabetes if your blood pressure is higher than 135/80 or if you take medicine for high blood pressure.	Get screened for diabetes if your blood pressure is higher than 135/80 or if you take medicine for high blood pressure.
<b>Colorectal cancer screening</b> (using fecal occult blood testing, sigmoidoscopy, or colonoscopy)			Starting at age 50, get screened for colorectal cancer.  Talk to your doctor or nurse about which screening test is best for you and how often you need it.	Get screened for colorectal cancer through age 75.  Talk to your doctor or nurse about which screening test is best for you and how often you need it.

### Assess Your Weight

If excess fat is carried around your abdomen, there is a greater risk for health conditions and diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. If you can pinch more than an inch by your waist or if your waist measure is equal to or greater than your hip measurement, excess fat is putting your health at risk. This risk goes up with a waist size that is greater than 35 inches for women. To correctly measure your waist, stand and place a tape measure around your middle, just above your hipbones. (Place the tape measure at your belly button.) Measure your waist just after you breathe out.

- Be sensible when you are losing weight. A slow, steady weight loss of a half-pound to one pound a week is safe and sustainable. The following practices are key to losing weight and/or maintaining a healthy body weight: increasing the amount of time you are physically active, monitoring your portion sizes, reducing the amount of energy dense/nutrient empty foods you are eating (candy, soda, cookies, chips, etc.), and increasing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products.

### Getting Nutrients through Variety

Eating a variety of nutritious foods is essential in planning a healthy diet. Planning out meals may be helpful to ensure you include all of the food groups throughout the day. Use the Dietary Guidelines for Americans to guide you in your food selections. The following sections provide important information about food choices for women. For a daily food plan that is appropriate for your age, gender and activity level, go to [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov).

### Grains

Grains are an important source of energy and nutrients that help our bodies work more efficiently. Any food made from wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, barley, or another cereal grain is a grain product. Some examples of common grains include bread, pasta, oatmeal, breakfast cereals, tortillas, and

grits. It is recommended that at least half the grains you eat should be whole grains. For most adults, this means eating at least three servings (equal to 3 ounces) of whole grain breads, cereals, rice, and pasta each day.

### Folic Acid

Green, leafy vegetables and many enriched grain products are good sources of folic acid. It is especially important that women of child-bearing years and older women eat foods rich in folic acid. Folic acid helps prevent birth defects and may reduce the risk of heart disease. The U.S. Public Health Service and CDC recommend that all women of childbearing age consume 0.4 mg (400 micrograms) of folic acid daily to prevent two common and serious birth defects, spina bifida, and anencephaly.

### Vegetables and Fruits

Vegetables and fruits add variety, texture, flavor, and many different nutrients to your diet. They are rich in fiber and low in fat and calories. Most women should eat 2½ cups of vegetables and 2 cups of fruits each day. One way to get the recommended amount each day is make half your plate fruits and vegetables. Choose a variety of different colored vegetables and fruits each day.

### Fiber

By adding fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to your diet you will increase your intake of dietary fiber. A daily fiber intake of 20-35 grams from a variety of food sources is recommended. When you increase fiber-rich foods, also increase fluid intake. At first, focus on only one change that will give you more fiber each day. As your body adjusts you can make more changes. Some easy ways to add fiber to your diet include:

- Eat fruits with their skin.
- Add cooked dry beans and peas to your salads and soups.
- Substitute half or more of all-purpose flour with whole wheat flour when baking.

- Choose whole grain breads and pasta.
- Use brown rice instead of white rice.
- Eat a whole-grain or bran breakfast cereal.
- Eat a bran muffin instead of a plain muffin.
- Choose vegetables, fruits, and whole grains for snacks.

## Potassium

Few Americans consume the recommended amount (4,700 mg) of potassium per day. Dietary potassium can lower blood pressure and may reduce the risk of developing kidney stones and decrease bone loss. Good sources of potassium include many fruits and vegetables, milk, and milk products.

## Dairy

Select calcium-rich foods such as low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt, and cheese (cheeses labeled 3 grams or less of fat per serving), canned fish with bones, green and leafy vegetables, and dried beans and peas. The current Dietary Guidelines recommend at least three cups of low-fat or fat-free milk or its equivalent each day. One cup of milk or yogurt, 1½ ounces of natural cheese, or 2 ounces of processed cheese are counted as one cup from the dairy group. Aim for daily intakes of 1,000-1,300 milligrams (mg) of calcium, depending on your age.

## Building Calcium into Your Diet

Osteoporosis is a bone disease that affects women in their later years, but the problem begins much earlier in life. Calcium supplied by milk and other foods is needed to build strong bones during adolescence and young adulthood. During the middle and older adult years calcium continues to be used for maintaining bone structure and reducing bone loss. Low calcium in the diet at all life stages is a risk factor for osteoporosis. Other risk factors include:

- Family history of osteoporosis
- Small bone frame and lean build
- White or Asian
- Lack of weight-bearing exercise such as walking or running
- Excessive alcohol use or smoking
- Menopause — estrogen replacement therapy may be advisable for some women. Check with your physician.

## Calcium Supplements

It is best to get calcium from foods but for some, supplements may be the only way to meet calcium needs. It is also best to consume your calcium throughout the day because your body can only absorb about 500 mg of calcium from food or supplements at one time. Calcium supplements come in various forms with the most popular forms being calcium citrate and calcium carbonate. Calcium carbonate needs to be taken at meals for best absorption. Calcium citrate doesn't need to be taken at meals but it is generally more costly than calcium carbonate. Calcium supplements should also contain vitamin D, which is needed to absorb calcium. Work with your health care professional to determine if you should take a calcium supplement and if so, what type is best for you.

## Vitamin D – The Sunshine Vitamin

Vitamin D is important for good health. Vitamin D is formed in the skin when you are outside in the sun. About 15 minutes of sunlight for fair-skinned people and about three hours for dark-skinned people will provide enough vitamin D for several days. Vitamin D is also found in fish oil, some types of fish (salmon, herring, tuna, and mackerel) and fortified milk, yogurt, and breakfast cereals. Most adults need 800 IU/day.

## Protein Foods

Protein foods include meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, beans and peas, soy products, nuts, and seeds. Foods from the protein foods group provide nutrients that are important for growth, strong muscles, and healthy organs, fighting infection, and preventing anemia. Choose poultry without skin, extra lean ground beef, cuts of beef and pork with 'loin' or 'round' in the name, and seafood. Choose seafood, unsalted nuts, and seeds a couple of times a week in place of meat because they contain healthy oils that are good for us.

## Making Wise Food Choices

Making wise food choices includes selecting foods that are low in fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sugar, as well as choosing and preparing foods with less salt, and drinking alcoholic beverages in moderation. If your favorite foods and beverages are high in fat, sugar, salt, and alcohol, the key is how much and how often you eat them.

## Finding Out About Fat

Fat is the most concentrated source of calories and is important for food flavor, helping the body absorb fat soluble vitamins, and providing essential nutrients. Moderate your fat intake, however, so that you will have room for the variety of foods you need to meet your other nutrient demands without exceeding your caloric needs. The suggested goals for dietary fat for adults are:

- **Total fat.** An amount that provides 35 percent or less of total calories is suggested. The upper limit on the fat grams in your diet depends on your calorie need. For example, if you eat 2,000 calories per day, your suggested upper limit is around 80 grams of fat, but if you eat 1,600 calories each day, your upper limit is around 60 grams of fat.
- **Saturated fat.** Less than 10 percent of calories should come from saturated fat. The fats in animal products are the main sources of saturated fat acids in most diets. Eating saturated fat in excess may increase blood cholesterol levels.

### Unsaturated fat.

- **Omega-3 fat.** This is a type of unsaturated fat that may improve overall heart health and lower blood pressure. Two types of Omega 3 fat (EPA and DHA) are found in fatty fish such as salmon, white tuna, mackerel, rainbow trout, herring, halibut, and sardines. Another Omega 3 (ALA) is more commonly found in soybean or canola oil, walnuts, and flaxseed or flaxseed oil. The American Heart Association recommends eating 2 to 4 ounces of fish at least two times per week to boost Omega-3 fatty acid intake.

- **Trans-fat.** Foods high in trans-fat, such as solid margarine and shortenings, or commercial foods, such as baked goods, snack foods, and fried foods that are made with these products tend to raise blood cholesterol and raise your risk of heart disease. It is recommended to keep trans-fat consumption as low as possible. Choose vegetable oils rather than fats that are solid at room temperature.

### Sugar Smarts

As you grow older, you may need fewer calories but you will still need the same nutrients as in earlier years. Sweet foods satisfy a taste preference so it is easy to eat too many, which gives you more calories than you need and leaves little room for other nutrient-rich foods. Look for sugar on the Nutrition Facts Label. Remember that every 4 grams of sugar content equals 1 teaspoon of sugar. Ingredient labels on food packaging will also help you identify sugar sources. Look for the following identifiers: granulated sugar, brown sugar, sucrose, glucose, dextrose, fructose, maltose, lactose, honey, corn syrup, corn sweetener, high-fructose corn syrup, or molasses.

### Be Salt Savvy

Salt is our primary source of sodium. Many Americans consume more sodium than is actually required. It is recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans that adults keep their sodium intake to less than 2,300 milligrams (equal to approximately 1 teaspoon of salt) per day. Those persons who are 51 and older and those of any age who are African American or have hypertension, diabetes, or chronic kidney disease should reduce their sodium intake to 1,500 mg per day. Small amounts of sodium occur naturally in foods. About two-thirds of sodium intake is from processed foods and the remainder is from salt added during cooking or at the table. Read labels when trying to lower sodium intake.

### Limit Alcohol

Alcoholic beverages supply calories but little or no nutrients. Too much alcohol may cause cirrhosis of the liver, inflammation of the pancreas, damage to the brain and heart, and increase risks for some cancers, injury, violence, and death. Major birth defects have been attributed to heavy drinking by the mother while pregnant and may occur before she knows that she is pregnant. The defects, collectively called Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, affect two infants in every 1,000 births. Women who are breast feeding, pregnant or trying to conceive should not drink alcoholic beverages. Moderate drinking for women is no more than one alcoholic beverage per day. One alcoholic beverage is equal to five ounces of wine, 10 ounces of wine cooler, 12 ounces of regular beer, or 1½ ounces of distilled spirits (80 proof).

### Physical Activity is a Partner

Physical activity is an equal partner in having a healthy lifestyle. Physical activity burns calories, increases muscle mass, and improves overall well-being. Ease into being more physically active. Set small goals at first and work up to the activity level that is right for you. For example, if you are very inactive now, begin with short walks of 5 to 10 minutes and then gradually increase your time to 30 to 60 minutes a day. The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend adults have at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, above usual activity, on most days of the week to reduce chronic disease risk. Greater health benefits and better weight management is possible when you exercise for longer periods. If you have specific medical problems that limit your activity, check with your health care professional for ideas about appropriate activities.

### Summary

Commonsense guidelines for good nutrition and health include health screening tests; maintaining a healthy weight; eating a variety of foods that provide vitamins and nutrients; limiting fats, sugar, salt, and alcohol; and physical activity.

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### Resources

- U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services and USDA. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 2010 (7th ed.). <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/DGAs2010-PolicyDocument.htm>.
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