

Nutrition and Your Health

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There is no doubt that our health and nutrition are important. But what exactly do these two words mean? And how are they related? In order to understand their relationship, we must be able to define what good health looks like and what it means to have good nutrition. Then, we can make healthy lifestyle choices each day that will help us prevent conditions and diseases related to poor nutrition.

What is nutrition?

The word nutrition is commonly used – at school, work, doctors' offices, in the news, and in what we read. Although we hear the word all the time, it doesn't mean that we fully understand what it means. Nutrition is making sure that our body receives the energy and nutrients it needs each day to grow and develop into healthy adults. Nutrients are the parts of our food and drink that have a function in our bodies. Examples are carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins, and minerals. Scientists can now tell us that there are certain nutrients that



we should focus on adding to our diet and that there are some that we should reduce in our diet.

Nutrients to Focus On in Our Diet

Nutrients to focus on in our diet (Table 1) are helpful to our body, allow it to work properly, and are necessary for growth and development at all ages of life. There are several important

vitamins, minerals, and food components that we should focus on getting in our diet. Some of the most important nutrients are directly listed on the Nutrition Facts Panel Label that you see on the back of most food packages. These include:

- Dietary fiber
- Vitamin A
- Vitamin C
- Calcium
- Iron

Nutrients to Reduce in Our Diet

Nutrients to reduce in our diet (Table 1) may actually cause harm to our body and are not helpful in large amounts. Although some of these nutrients are necessary for our body to function, we generally take in way more than we need, which actually causes the body to work improperly. Nutrients we should limit are listed on the Nutrition Facts Panel Label. These include:

- Saturated fat
- Trans fat
- Cholesterol
- Sodium
- Added sugar

What does it mean to be healthy?

Some of the first words you may think of when you hear the word “healthy” are vegetables, exercise, doctor, or medication. These words are right—they are all health-promoting things. Being healthy means having the energy and motivation to go through each day without any problems or concerns. In order to be healthy, decisions must be made regularly that support a healthy body and these include a number of topics. One key part of being healthy is making smart decisions about nutrition.

Table 1. Nutrients and where they are found.

Nutrients to Focus On	Nutrients to Reduce
Dietary fiber – whole, raw fruits and vegetables; whole-grain products, such as oatmeal and pasta; beans; peas; nuts	Saturated fat – fatty beef, pork, processed meats; chicken including the skin; butter; cheese; whole milk
Vitamin A – sweet potatoes, carrots, green leafy vegetables, cantaloupe, bell peppers	Trans fat – cakes, pies, cookies that can sit on the shelf a long time; margarine; microwave popcorn; candies
Vitamin C – oranges, bell peppers, kale, broccoli, strawberries, grapefruit	Cholesterol – chicken liver; butter; processed meats, such as bacon and deli meats; beef; cheese
Calcium – milk, yogurt, cheese, calcium-rich orange juice, kale, broccoli	Sodium – fast-food meals; deli meats; frozen pizza; canned entrees, such as ravioli or soups; condiments and sauces
Iron – lean meat, spinach, legumes, raisins	Added sugar – sugar-sweetened beverages; candies; cakes; cookies; condiments, such as ketchup and salad dressing; flavored milks, such as strawberry or chocolate

How is nutrition related to health?

Research tells us that the old saying, “You are what you eat,” is actually true. We now know how what we eat can impact how we think and feel, how well we sleep, and how our bodies can move and function. We also know certain nutrients, such as the nutrients we should reduce in our diet, may lead to or make certain health conditions or diseases worse. For example:

- Added sugar is linked to Type 2 diabetes (from weight gain)
- Sodium is linked to high blood pressure
- Unhealthy fats, such as saturated and trans fats, are linked to heart disease

- All of these are linked to overweight or obesity

On the other hand, knowing what nutrients to get enough of may help prevent certain nutrition-related conditions and diseases. This is why it is so important to understand how the foods and drinks we choose affect our overall health. For example:

- Lean protein is linked to a healthy weight
- Vitamins and minerals in fruits and vegetables are linked to cancer prevention and improved lung function

Chronic is a way to describe diseases that people may have to live with for a long time. People of any age, race, ethnicity, or gender could have a disease

Table 2. Common chronic diseases related to nutrition.

Chronic Disease	Definition
Obesity	Body weight at least 20% greater than what is considered healthy
Type 2 diabetes	Body is unable to take up sugar from the blood for energy and blood sugar levels stay high over a long period of time
High blood pressure	Force pushing blood through blood vessels is too high over time
Heart disease	Commonly caused by a build-up of fat inside blood vessels
Cancer	Damaged cells grow and divide uncontrollably in the body
COPD	Damaged lungs that make it hard to take in oxygen and breathe

that is chronic. Several health conditions and chronic diseases are related to nutrition (Table 2). These are called diet-related chronic diseases.

What choices can you make to improve your health through nutrition?

It is never too early or too late to start making healthy nutrition-related choices. Here are a few tips on how to start building a healthy diet each day. Don't forget to encourage friends and family to do the same.

Know your nutrients. If you know nutrition, you can make food and drink decisions that promote a healthy body. When possible, choose good nutrients over bad to make sure the body is receiving all it needs to work properly.

Read the Nutrition Facts Panel Label. A Nutrition Facts Panel Label is found on the back of almost all packaged and convenience foods. Exceptions include raw fruits, vegetables, fish, tea, and coffee.

The Nutrition Facts Label tells us important information, such as:

- Serving size
- Calories
- Nutrients to focus on
- Nutrients to limit
- Additional nutrients such as protein and carbohydrates
- Percent daily values

This information can be used to decide whether a food or drink item is a healthy choice. It has even been shown that women in the United States who look at the Nutrition Facts Panel Label when making food decisions weigh about 8 pounds less than women who do not!

Be patient. It takes time to develop healthy habits and we know that small changes over time are the best way to develop those healthy habits. Don't get frustrated. It may not be easy



at the beginning, but with time healthy food choices will become easier.

Eat mindfully. Pay attention to when you are hungry and when you are full. Don't confuse boredom or thirst with hunger. Learn how to listen to your body.

References

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