



Healthful Food Choices

A balanced diet of healthful foods provides your body with the good health and energy to enjoy life to the fullest. Your health will vary throughout your lifespan and is partially based upon genetics, but largely it is determined by your food and lifestyle choices. Science backs up the old saying, “*You are what you eat.*” Choosing a healthful, balanced diet and making good eating, exercise and lifestyle choices will have a positive impact on you.

Choosing healthy foods sounds pretty basic, but what defines a food as healthy or not-so-healthy? There are some foods that will meet your body’s nutritional requirements better than others. Our bodies’ nutritional needs are best met when we choose a variety of foods from different food groups. There is no single food or food group that can provide your body with optimal nutrition. Each food group provides unique and specific nutrients for optimal health. With that in mind, let’s first explore what a food should contain to be considered ‘healthy,’ and then we’ll put it all together with the Barix Nutrition Guide.

Components of a Healthful Food

In the last century, the American diet has dramatically changed. Some of the changes have positively affected the health of our citizens. The availability of fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the year, the fortification of foods with essential nutrients, and the technology of refrigeration improving the quality and safety of our food supply have been positive changes. On the down side, many of our foods are now highly processed with many additives; convenience foods, fast foods, and large portions encourage over-consumption; and our sugar consumption is an all-time high. We have the opportunity to choose healthier foods more than ever before, but the lure of quick, convenient, and inexpensive processed food often wins out.

Closest to Nature

One concept to keep in mind when looking for healthier foods is that foods closest to their natural form are typically better choices. Take for example an apple. In its original form, it provides 81 calories, 18 grams of naturally-occurring sugar and almost 4 grams of dietary fiber. Process the apple into apple juice and it will have 112 calories in 12 oz, 28 grams of sugar and almost no dietary fiber. Make it into applesauce and it ends up with 110 calories, 26 grams of sugar and no fiber in a 4 oz serving. Continuing down this line of thought, if you process the apple into a slice of apple pie, it will provide 400 calories, 31 grams of sugar and 19 grams of fat. Clearly the crisp, crunchy sweetness of nature’s apple cannot be improved upon. When choosing healthful foods, consider what has been taken out or added during processing. Choose foods in their natural forms when possible.

Vitamins and Minerals

Vitamins and minerals are nutrients required in relatively small amounts, vital for health, that cannot be produced by the body and therefore need to be supplied by the diet.

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Several vitamins and minerals have been identified as essential to prevent deficiency diseases. Neither vitamins nor minerals provide calories. Some foods are dense with a vitamin(s) or mineral(s). Think of an orange, which provides 75 mg of Vitamin C, meeting the daily Vitamin C requirements for most people; skim milk, which provides about 1/3 of the calcium requirement in an 8 oz glass; and broccoli, which scores high with 75% of Vitamin A, 50% of Vitamin C and 100% of Vitamin K provided in a 12 calorie ½ cup serving. Other foods are nearly void of anything but calories. These are often referred to as ‘empty calorie foods.’ Cake, candy, pop, french fries, doughnuts and chips classify as empty calorie foods. Even the no-added-sugar varieties of these foods lack substantial nutrients.

Phytochemicals

Our understanding of nutrition is constantly growing. In recent years the health-boosting benefits of phytochemicals have been discovered. Phytochemicals are substances found in plants that contain disease-preventing compounds. You are probably familiar with one type of phytochemical called an antioxidant. Antioxidants help the body to prevent damage that can lead to cancer, heart disease and strokes. Known antioxidants include Vitamins C, E and A; selenium (a mineral); and carotenoids (the compounds that give plants their color). It has been estimated that more than 100 different phytochemicals may be found in one serving of vegetables. As the evidence grows, the message is clear: eat 5 servings a day from the fruit and vegetable groups. Just keep in mind that Cherry Coke does not count as a fruit serving!

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates have been given a bad rap lately. New low-carb products appear on the grocery store shelves daily. Are carbohydrates unhealthy? Do they lead to obesity, diabetes, and other disorders? There are still a lot of questions, and more research is needed. What we do know is that carbohydrates are the body’s main fuel source. Many ‘carbs’ are foods that also contain important vitamins and minerals needed for good health. Foods from the dairy, vegetable, fruit, and grain food groups all contain a significant amount of carbohydrates. Drastically reducing carbohydrates to very low levels means eliminating important foods from each of these food groups. Recent research indicates that there is no long-term advantage to low-carbohydrate diets for weight loss.

Although scientific research does not support drastic cutting of carbohydrates, it does make sense to limit the carbohydrate sugar. Sugar intake continues to be at an all-time high with the average American consuming 37 teaspoons of added sugar daily. Much of this is in the form of sugar-laden soft drinks and fruit drinks. Sugar is one of the empty calorie foods mentioned earlier. It provides calories and no other health-boosting nutrients. The effects that it has on blood sugar levels and insulin levels (not to mention dumping syndrome) and the extra empty calories it provides are enough to warrant a very drastic reduction or elimination from the diet. Beware of no-added-sugar treats. Often they are no lower in calories and may be higher in fat than the sugar-laden originals. Choose these foods as an occasional treat rather than a daily indulgence.

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Fiber is found in fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains. It helps to move food through the digestive system more effectively. Certain types of fiber can help to lower cholesterol levels. The American Heart Association recommends obtaining 25-30 grams of fiber from food daily. The Barix Nutrition Guide's recommendations for fruits, vegetables, bread, cereal, rice and pasta support the intake of adequate fiber. Choosing foods in their closest-to-nature state significantly increases the fiber content.

Protein

Protein is especially important during the rapid weight loss phase following surgery. Obtaining adequate protein and engaging in regular exercise will promote the loss of fatty tissue while maintaining a greater amount of muscle tissue. Complete proteins are found in the meat, fish and poultry food group and the dairy food group. Protein supplements or protein bars can also be helpful in meeting protein goals. Eighteen months after surgery, protein needs return to pre-surgery levels. For women, 45-55 grams of complete protein daily is adequate and for men, 60-70 grams of protein is adequate. Consuming excessive protein is not beneficial and will be stored, as all excess calories are, in the form of fat.

Satiety Level

Foods should provide a certain satiety level. That is, they should make you feel satisfied after eating and for a few hours longer. Those that contain fiber, fat or protein and require chewing tend to have a higher satiety level than simple carbohydrates. Some foods may leave one person satisfied and another person scrambling back to the fridge. Yogurt for me is a low satiety level food. I like yogurt and it has some good health benefits, but I don't feel like I have had anything to eat after polishing off a carton. For approximately the same calorie investment, I can choose lean turkey on light bread with Fat Free Miracle Whip and feel very satisfied. Begin to notice the satiety level of the foods that you choose.

Not-So-Healthful Foods

We have talked a lot about what makes a food healthful. What about the flip side...what makes a food not-so-healthful? Not-so-healthful foods contain added sugars, excessive sodium, hydrogenated or saturated fat, and calories. They're highly processed and are offered in ways that make portions hard to limit. Again, think of the apple...perfectly portioned, with no added sugar, sodium or fat; moderate in calories and free from processing. Compare a bag of chips, which are high in sodium and fat, highly processed and bulk packaged to encourage over-consumption. It would be so easy to mindlessly eat ½ a bag of chips while watching TV and load up on 1000 calories, but think of eating the equivalent amount of calories in the form of apples--it would take 12 medium-sized apples.