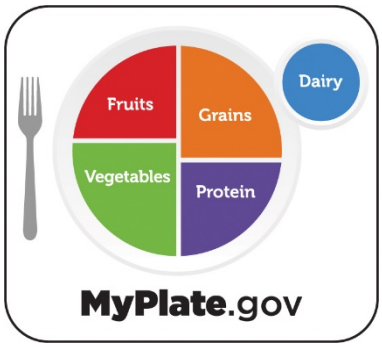
Eat Healthy to be Nutrient Wealthy

There really is something to be said about the phrase, "you are what you eat." Food provides nutrients essential for life and growth, and what you eat every day determines how well your body is fueled and how well it functions.



A visual tool that helps guide our eating patterns to include all necessary nutrients is MyPlate. MyPlate groups foods into five main categories – grains, proteins, fruits, vegetables and dairy. Each food group provides a range of nutrients, and all have specific roles in helping the body run correctly. Let's take a closer look.

Grains: Eating foods from the Grain Group, especially whole grains which include the entire grain kernel, provide many B vitamins (thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, folic acid), iron and fiber. Foods in this group tend to get a bad rap currently due to popular gluten-free and high protein diets. However, these foods provide essential nutrients not necessarily found in other food groups. These nutrients play important roles in metabolism; production of red blood cells; aiding in digestion and constipation issues; lowering blood cholesterol; reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, obesity and type 2 diabetes; weight management; and prevention of neural tube defects in babies. Foods in this group include those made from wheat, oats, rye, rice, barley, cornmeal or other cereal grain. Some examples are pasta, cereal, bread, tortillas and crackers. Whole grains would include things such as brown rice, oatmeal, 100% whole wheat bread and whole grain pasta. Whole grains may be identified on packages by the Whole Grain Stamp, a statement somewhere like "100% whole grain" or "100% whole wheat" or the main ingredient on the label listed as "whole grain", "whole wheat (or other grain), "stoneground whole wheat (or other grain)", "brown rice", "oats", or "wheatberries".

Certain health conditions require people to follow a gluten-free diet. This can lead to deficient intake of fiber, iron, folate and other B vitamins, so consulting with a dietician to develop an eating plan to ensure these needs are met is important.

Protein: Protein group foods are good sources of protein, B vitamins, vitamin E, iron, zinc and magnesium. Proteins are building blocks for bones, muscles, cartilage, skin and blood. Nutrients in this group also support the formation of enzymes, hormones and vitamins; prevent anemia; assist functions of the immune and nervous systems; help release energy; and help with heart health when it comes to omega-3 fatty acids found in seafood. We typically think of meat, poultry, fish and eggs in this group, but it also includes non-animal sources of protein such as nuts and seeds (including seed and nut butters like peanut butter), beans, peas, lentils and soy products like tofu and tempeh. Most Americans eat enough from the protein group but need to choose leaner varieties of meat and poultry and a larger assortment within the group including plant-based choices. This can help increase intake of unsaturated fats, dietary fiber and vitamin D and decrease intake of sodium and saturated fats from processed meat and poultry.

Fruit: Any fruit or 100% fruit juice is part of this group. Many fruits provide a good source of fiber along with numerous vitamins, minerals and antioxidants that aid in maintaining healthy blood pressure; growth and repair of all body tissues; healing cuts and wounds; teeth and gum health; iron absorption; and protection against heart disease, cancer and other chronic diseases.

Vegetables: This group of foods provide important sources of nutrients such as fiber, potassium, folate, vitamin A and vitamin C. Much like the Fruit Group, vegetables play an important role in reducing risk of certain chronic diseases. They are naturally low in fat and calories; keep eyes and skin healthy; aid in healing; protect against infections; can reduce chances of heart attack and stroke; and protect against certain types of cancer. Vegetables can be found in a variety of colors and can be starchy or non-starchy.

Dairy: Dairy group foods are important sources of the minerals calcium and phosphorus as well as vitamin A, D, B12, riboflavin, protein, potassium, zinc, choline, magnesium and selenium. This group is needed for building and maintaining strong bones and teeth, maintaining blood pressure, helps with maintaining proper levels of calcium and phosphorus, as well as providing protein. Foods in this group include milk, yogurt and cheese. Dairy alternatives of fortified soy milk and yogurt with added calcium, vitamin A and vitamin D, are considered a part of the dairy group choices because of their similar nutrient content of dairy milk and yogurt. However, other plant based "milk" products (almond, rice, coconut, oat, and hemp "milk") may contain calcium, but their nutrient content is not comparable to dairy milk and fortified soy milk.

What about lactose intolerance? Lactose is the natural sugar found in all dairy products. The body breaks it down and digests it with the help of the enzyme lactase. Some people have low levels of lactase, so the undigested lactose passes into the small intestine where bacteria ferment it, producing gas, bloating, diarrhea or constipation. Certain dairy products, such as yogurt and aged cheese, have low levels of lactose. People with lactose intolerance may be able to eat these products in moderation or use Lactaid pills or Lactaid milk.

Scientists continue to find micronutrients, phytochemicals and other compounds in foods linked to health, and chances are more will to be discovered in the future. As you can see, each food group has some unique nutrient characteristics. Eliminating food groups or certain types of foods can lead to nutrient voids. Eating a balanced diet that includes a variety of foods is essential for good health at any stage of life, and the benefits of eating healthy over time add up. Even small changes matter! Including foods from all food groups and varying your choices within each food group helps ensure you are getting the essential nutrients you need for optimal health.

Additional Resources:

USDA MyPlate - https://www.myplate.gov/

Food Smart Colorado, Colorado State University Extension - https://foodsmartcolorado.colostate.edu/

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - https://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/healthy_eating/index.html

AHW Lesson Activities

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"Applying the Lesson"

Choose one of the following activities to apply what you learned about your health and your healthy goal setting. Write a short response (3 to 5 sentences) to describe what you did and learned from the activity selected. Report your Applying the Lesson results by Online form, email, fax or hard copy to your county Extension Office.

Option 1: Track what you eat over the next 7 days. Think about how your food choices come together over the course of the week. Did you average the recommended daily servings of each food group? Did you include a variety of foods within each food group? Is there something missing? Choose one thing you can change or incorporate starting next week to build on a healthier eating routine.

Option 2: Take a look at the label of a food from the Grain Group you normally eat. Is it whole grain? Are at least half of the choices you make of foods from the Grain Group whole grain? If not, what changes can you make to include more whole grain foods?

Option 3: Fewer than 1 in 10 adults in the U.S. eat enough fruits and vegetables. If this statistic relates to you, think about ways you can incorporate more fruits and vegetables in your day. Give at least one specific example of how you can add more to your breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks.