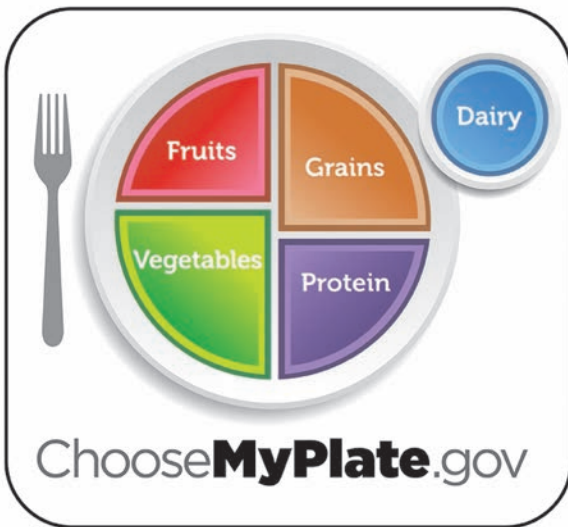# Healthy Eating: How to Start Eating Better

MyPlate is a program from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Healthy eating includes eating a variety of foods from the basic food groups:

- Whole grains, such as bread, cereal, pasta, and rice
- Lean meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, seeds, and nuts
- Milk, yogurt, and cheese, preferably low-fat or fat-free
- Fruits and vegetables

As simple as this sounds, it is not always easy to get the healthy food you need. You might eat more of your favorite foods from only one food group, and as a result, avoid others. When you are hungry, you might eat what is easiest instead of what is best.

What is suggested?

For a balanced diet, eat:

- 5 to 6 ounces (oz) of grains, such as cereals, breads, crackers, rice, or pasta. An ounce is about 1 slice of bread, 1 cup of breakfast cereal, or ½ cup of cooked rice, cereal, or pasta. Half of the grains you eat should be whole grains.

- 2 to 3 cups of vegetables, especially dark green vegetables, orange vegetables, beans, and lentils.
- 1½ to 2 cups of fresh, frozen, or canned fruit. A small apple, a large banana, or 2 large plums equal 1 cup.
- 3 cups of nonfat or low-fat milk products. One cup is equal to 8 oz milk or yogurt, 1½ oz hard cheese, or 2 oz processed cheese.
- 5 to 6½ oz of protein foods, such as skinless chicken, fish, lean meat, beans, nuts, and seeds. One egg, ½ oz of nuts or seeds, or 1 tablespoon peanut butter equals 1 oz of protein. A ½ cup of cooked beans equals 2 ounces of protein.

Pay attention to serving sizes. The number of servings you need each day depends on your age, sex, and activity level. Eat a variety of foods from each of the food groups. You do not need to meet the minimum number every day, but try to get the recommended servings on average during the week.

It may help to keep track of what you eat from each food group during the entire week. Then you can average out your daily servings from each group. If you are low in any food group, you can eat more from that group during the next week. If you need help changing the way you eat, talk to your doctor. He or she may refer you to a registered dietitian, an expert in healthy eating.

How can you change your habits?

Eating healthy is not about dieting. It is a way to improve your health.

Do not try to make big changes to how you eat all at once. You might feel that you are missing out on your favorite foods and then be more likely to fail.

Start slowly, and gradually change your habits. Try some of these tips:

- Use whole wheat bread instead of white bread.

- Try nonfat or low-fat milk, cheeses, and yogurt.

- Eat brown rice instead of white rice, and eat whole wheat pasta instead of white-flour pasta.

- Add more fruits and vegetables to meals, and have them for snacks.

- Add vegetables to sandwiches.

- Add fruit to yogurt and cereal.

- Limit the number of times you eat in a restaurant. Most restaurant food has too much fat, salt, and calories, and not enough fiber.

All foods can be a part of a healthy way to eat, if you eat them in moderation. If your favorite foods are high in fat, salt, sugar, and calories, limit how often you eat them, eat smaller servings, or look for healthy substitutes.

Eat a wide variety of foods, especially those high in nutrients, such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, fish, lean meats, and poultry.

How does healthy eating help you?

Not only does eating healthy protect you from disease, it also can help you control some diseases you may already have.

- Getting enough calcium and vitamin D helps protect your bones from becoming thin and brittle as you get older. If you already have brittle bones, calcium can keep them from getting worse. Calcium is found in dairy products and certain leafy green vegetables (turnip, collard, and mustard greens; kale; bok choy; and broccoli). Look for other products that are calcium-fortified. Vitamin D is found in egg yolks; oily fish like tuna and salmon; and foods with added (fortified) vitamin D, such as milk and other milk products, orange juice, and breakfast cereals.

- Low-fat eating that includes plenty of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products can lower your chances of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. It may also prevent certain types of cancer.

- Eating oily fish that has a lot of omega-3 fatty acids can help lower your risk of heart disease.

- Eating lots of fruits and vegetables helps lower your risk of cancer, heart attack, and stroke.

- Eating foods that contain folate or folic acid (such as leafy green vegetables or folic acid-enriched grains) before and during pregnancy helps protect babies from birth defects.

- Limiting saturated fats and avoiding trans fats can help lower your risk of high cholesterol, heart attack, and stroke.

- Using healthy fats such as olive, peanut, and canola oils are part of a heart-healthy eating plan.