

Chapter 6. Calories + Nutrients = Food

In this chapter, we'll talk about why the types of foods your calories come from matter. Calories plus nutrients equals food. . . well, there is more to it than that. But the important thing to know is when you eat and drink, you take in nutrients and calories.

Now that you have a goal for **how many calories** you need to achieve or maintain a healthy weight (you wrote it in "My Personal Profile"), it is time to learn **what types and amounts** of foods to eat that will be healthy, satisfying, and meet your calorie goal. You may be eating enough food, but not eating the right foods that give your body the nutrients you need to be healthy. What you eat is just as important as how much you eat. A healthy eating plan is one that:

- Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and equivalent milk products. Specifically, many fruits and vegetables are packed with nutrients but have very few calories.
- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans (legumes), eggs, and nuts.
- Is low in saturated and *trans* fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.
- Balances calorie intake with calorie needs.

Let's talk about why healthy eating is important.

What are nutrients?

Nutrients are substances that play a role in health. For example, vitamins and minerals are nutrients, as are fats, protein, and carbohydrates. Nutrients are in foods and can come from dietary supplements. However, the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the basis for this book, makes a point that nutrients consumed should come primarily from foods. Foods contain vitamins and minerals that are often found in supplements, but food also contains hundreds of beneficial naturally occurring substances that may protect against chronic health problems. Therefore, if you have a choice between an orange or a vitamin C supplement, it is better to eat the orange.

Some specific groups of people have higher requirements for certain nutrients and may benefit from use of vitamin and mineral supplements. These groups include women of childbearing age, who may become pregnant; women who are in their first trimester (that is, the first 3 months) of pregnancy; people over 50; people with dark skin; and people who don't get enough sunlight. If you fall into one of these groups, we have more specifics for you on pages 262 to 263, in part V. However, most people

will not need to exceed 100% of their RDA. RDA stands for Recommended Dietary Allowance—the amount of a specific nutrient needed each day.

Why are nutrients important for you?

It is important that you meet your recommended nutrient needs because they offer important benefits—normal growth and development of children, health promotion for people of all ages, and reduction of risk for a number of chronic diseases.

In part V, “Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005,” there is a thorough discussion regarding the health benefits of consuming specific nutrients. We encourage you to read it. But for those of you who want to know what to do without more of the why, you can start here. For the rest of you who want to know more of the why and the science behind the why, pages 257 to 264, in part V, are for you.

Many Americans don’t consume the right amount of many nutrients. For each of us, there is a recommended need for specific nutrients. This need is based on our age and gender. From data collected by the federal government and scientists across the nation, we know the nutrients Americans need to pay special attention to, because they may not be getting enough of them:

- **Adults:** calcium, potassium, fiber, magnesium, and vitamins A, C, and E
- **Children and adolescents:** calcium, potassium, fiber, magnesium, and vitamin E
- **Specific population groups:** vitamin B₁₂, iron, folic acid, and vitamins E and D

For example, women of childbearing age, who may become pregnant, and women who are in their first trimester (that is, the first 3 months) of pregnancy need to pay attention to their folic acid intake. Also, adolescents, women of childbearing age, who may become pregnant, and pregnant women (at all stages) need to watch their iron intake.

Maximizing your nutrients—making calories work for you

The main premise of this book is that food should provide you with all the nutrients you need for growth and health. You may be saying to yourself, “How am I going to control my calories and get enough nutrients? This is too much information.”

Earlier, you set your calorie goal and learned how to monitor your intake. Calories are one aspect of your diet. Another is trying to eat types and amounts of food that will promote health and help prevent chronic diseases. You could use up all of your calories on a few high-calorie foods or drinks, but if you did, chances are you wouldn't get the full range of nutrients your body needs to be healthy. Choose the most nutritionally rich foods you can each day—those packed with vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other nutrients but lower in calories. Pick foods like fruits, vegetables, dry beans and peas, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and equivalent milk products more often.

At first, this may seem like a lot of information. You don't have to do everything at once. Remember, this is a lifestyle makeover, not quick weight loss. Relax. You can pick one aspect of your diet to work on at a time. We want to help you find what works for you. In the following chapters, you will find tips and resources to help you set goals for yourself.