

NIH News in Health

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Better Nutrition Every Day How to Make Healthier Food Choices

We make dozens of decisions every day. When it comes to deciding what to eat and feed our families, it can be a lot easier than you might think to make smart, healthy choices. It takes just a little planning.

The food we put into our bodies is our fuel. It provides us with nutrients—the vitamins, minerals, and other compounds our bodies need to function and thrive. Research shows that good food choices are especially important for children's growing bodies and minds. Smart choices have both immediate and long-lasting benefits for you and your family.

"My best advice is for parents to be good role models by eating healthy and being physically active with their children," says Janet de Jesus, a nutritionist at NIH. "Keep healthy foods around the house for meals and snacks. If you save desserts and treats for special occasions, it will be more special. Involve children in the meal planning and cooking, and they will be more likely to eat the meals."

"Parents can begin teaching their children about healthy eating from the day they are born," says Dr. Donna Spruijt-Metz, whose research at the University of Southern California focuses on preventing and treating obesity in minority youth. "Setting a good example is very important."

Try the GO, SLOW, WHOA approach to food. GO foods are great to eat



anytime. They have lots of nutrients and are low in unhealthy fats, sugar, and calories. GO foods include fruits; vegetables; whole-grain cereals, breads, and pastas; fat-free or low-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese; fat-trimmed and lean meats; fish; beans; and water. SLOW foods should be eaten less often. These include non-whole-grain bread, rice, and pasta; peanut butter; granola; pretzels; and fruit juices. WHOA foods are only for once in a while—foods like french fries, doughnuts, whole milk, full-fat cheese, hot dogs, fried fish and chicken, candy, and soda.

"Healthier diets don't have to cost more, provided that you have the right attitude, make the right

food choices, and try to cook at home," says Dr. Adam Drewnowski, a nutrition expert at the University of Washington in Seattle. With some planning, he says, you can prepare meals that are tasty, affordable, and nutrient rich.

Get the whole family to help slice, dice, and chop. NIH has developed several resources to help you learn how to cut unhealthy fats and calories (see the Web Links box). You might be surprised how easy healthy cooking and snacking can be.

Unfortunately, these days much of our food isn't eaten at home. It's eaten on the go. One easy way to eat more nutritiously is to pack healthy lunches—both for yourself and your kids.

"You can work with your child to make a lunch using whole-grain bread, wraps, or pita pockets filled with lean meats or cheese, vegetables, and nut butters or spreads, such as hummus," de Jesus says. "Pack vegetables such as carrots, snap peas and cucumbers, or any fresh fruit that's currently in season. Teens can learn to pack their own lunches with a healthy variety of foods."

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If your kids buy lunch, talk to them about making healthy choices when buying food from the school cafeteria and vending machines. "Parents should encourage their children to choose the important food groups

for lunch: a lean protein, fruit and vegetable, whole grains," de Jesus says. "If a salad bar is available, this is a great opportunity for kids to make their own salad with vegetables, lean protein, and even fruit."

If you have a busy day with your family planned, pack healthy snacks in a small cooler or tote bag before you leave. Consider water, fresh fruit, veggies, and low-fat cheese sticks. Pack small baggies with small portions of healthy nuts, whole-grain crackers, or a low-sugar cereal.

Fast-food restaurants can also be a challenge. Sometimes, fast food is your only option. Try making healthier choices, such as sandwiches without cheese, salads, sliced fruit instead of french fries, and grilled options instead of fried.

When you're grocery shopping, the Nutrition Facts label is a great resource to help you compare foods. It can help you confirm whether products marked with healthy-sounding terms really are healthy. For example, "low-fat" foods aren't necessarily healthy; they can be very high in sugar and calories.

Use the Nutrition Facts label to help guide you to limit the nutrients you want to cut back on, such as sodium and unhealthy saturated fat. You can also use it to make sure you're getting plenty of the nutrients you need, such as calcium and iron.

When reading the label, start at the top. Look at the serving size. Next, look at the calorie count. Then move on to the nutrients, where it lists the



Web Links

To learn more about healthy food choices, click the "Links" tab at:
<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Sep2015/Feature1>

amount and daily values experts recommend.

Remember that what you might eat as one portion can be multiple servings. For example, if you eat one bag of chips but the label says there are 3 servings in a bag, you need to multiply all the numbers on the label by 3 to find out how many calories you just ate.

Sometimes it can be hard to find healthy food choices when shopping locally. People in some communities have been working together to make it easier to find healthy foods in their neighborhoods.

For instance, in some neighborhoods, people have joined together to tend community garden plots. "Learning to garden, planting rooftop gardens, box gardens, or small planters can provide some easy growing veggies like tomatoes right at home," Spruijt-Metz says. "Another possibility is finding a fruit and vegetable truck that would be willing to come to the neighborhood."

Take time to build healthy eating decisions into every aspect of your family's life. If you're a parent or guardian, start talking with kids at an early age about health and nutrition. And practice what you preach. Make healthy food choices yourself so you can set a good example for your kids.

"Food provides our bodies with needed nourishment. Teaching children to read labels while shopping as they get older is a good way to help them learn to shop for healthy foods," Spruijt-Metz says. "Teaching them to cook simple, tasty, and healthy meals when they're young is a skill that will stay with them throughout their lives." ■



Wise Choices Tips for Eating Out

- Choose foods that are steamed, broiled, baked, roasted, poached, or lightly sautéed or stir-fried.
- Ask for fat-free or low-fat milk instead of cream for coffee or tea.
- Pick food without butter, gravy, or sauces—or ask to have the food without it.
- Choose a low-calorie salad dressing.
- Ask for salad dressing on the side, and use only some of it.
- Pick drinks without added sugar, such as water, fat-free or low-fat milk, unsweetened tea, or diet iced tea, lemonade, or soda.
- Trim visible fat from poultry or meat.
- Don't eat the skin on cooked chicken or turkey.
- Share your meal, or take half home for later.
- Skip dessert or order fruit. Or share dessert with a friend.

NIH News in Health

ISSN 2375-6993 (Print)

ISSN 1556-3898 (Online)

National Institutes of Health

Office of Communications

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Thinking About Your Thyroid

Get to Know This Small but Mighty Gland

You've probably heard of the thyroid gland, but do you know what it does? You might not give it a second thought unless something goes wrong. Thyroid trouble can cause a range of seemingly unrelated problems, including drastic changes to your weight, energy, digestion, or mood. Learn to recognize signs of thyroid disorder, so you can get treatment if needed.

The thyroid is a small but powerful butterfly-shaped gland located at the front of your neck. It controls many of your body's most important functions. The thyroid gland makes **hormones** that affect your breathing, heart rate, digestion, and body temperature. These systems speed up as thyroid hormone levels rise. But problems occur if the thyroid makes

too much hormone or not enough.

Nearly 1 in 20 Americans ages 12 and older has an under-active thyroid, or hypothyroidism. When thyroid glands don't produce enough hormones, many body functions slow down. A smaller number of people—about 1 in 100—has an over-active thyroid, called hyperthyroidism. Their thyroids release too much hormone.

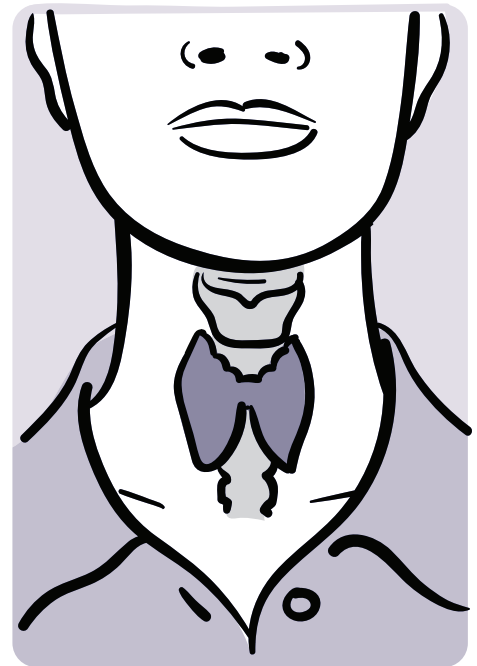
Thyroid problems are most likely to occur in women or in people over age 60. Having a family history of thyroid disorders also increases the risk.

Thyroid problems are often caused by autoimmune disorders, in which the **immune system** mistakenly attacks and destroys the body's own cells. For example, an autoimmune disorder called Graves' disease can cause the thyroid to be over-active, while one called Hashimoto's disease can make the thyroid under-active.

Thyroid disorders can be hard to diagnose, because the symptoms are similar to other conditions. "Hypothyroidism can be very subtle," says NIH's Dr. Monica Skarulis, an expert on the thyroid. If a thyroid disorder is suspected—maybe because of a weight change or fatigue—blood tests can help to confirm the diagnosis and find its cause.

Patients with under-active thyroids can be treated with artificial thyroid hormones. Over-active thyroids are often treated with medications that reduce hormone levels.

During pregnancy, thyroid hormones can affect the health of both the mother and the developing baby.



Thyroid hormone levels sometimes need to be carefully monitored and adjusted, even if the expectant mother never had thyroid problems before. After pregnancy, some women have abnormal levels of thyroid hormone for a year or more.

The thyroid gland also can be affected by cancer. Thyroid cancer usually has no symptoms. It's sometimes first noticed as a lump in the neck—although such bumps are more likely to be harmless nodules.

"Thyroid nodules are extremely common, whereas thyroid cancer is pretty rare," Skarulis says. A doctor can determine if a nodule is cancerous by removing and examining a tiny piece of it. If it shows signs of cancer, the nodule or even the entire thyroid will be removed.

If you notice signs of thyroid disease, talk with a health professional. Based on your family history, symptoms, and medical exam, your provider can help you decide if further testing or treatment is needed. ■



Wise Choices Symptoms of Thyroid Disorder

Hypothyroidism:

- Fatigue
- Depression
- Joint and muscle pain
- Cold intolerance
- Slowed heart rate
- Constipation
- Weight gain

Hyperthyroidism:

- Fatigue
- Nervousness or irritability
- Trouble sleeping
- Muscle weakness
- Heat intolerance or increased sweating
- Rapid and irregular heartbeat
- Frequent bowel movements or diarrhea
- Weight loss



Definitions

Hormones

Substances made by the body to affect how the body grows and functions.

Immune System

The system that protects your body from invading viruses, bacteria, and other microscopic threats.



Web Links

To learn more about the thyroid gland, click the "Links" tab at:
<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Sep2015/Feature2>



Health Capsules

For links to more information, see these stories online:
<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Sep2015/Capsule1>

Checking the Symptom Checkers

When something's ailing you, do you turn to the Internet or an app on your phone to help figure out what's wrong? Free symptom checking programs usually don't give the correct diagnosis first, a study found, and their advice on when to seek help usually errs on the side of caution.

Symptom checking programs ask a series of questions about symptoms. They analyze the responses and then give a possible diagnosis. Some also offer triage advice about whether to seek medical care and, if so, how quickly and at what kind of facility. For people with a life-threatening problem, such as stroke or heart attack, symptom checkers could save lives. For those with a problem that doesn't require a medical visit, they can save trouble and costs.

The helpfulness of symptom checkers depends on their accuracy.

To evaluate the performance of these programs, an NIH-funded research team searched for free symptom checkers online, in the Apple app store, and on Google Play. Many symptom checkers worked in similar ways. The scientists chose a set of 23 programs for analysis.

The symptom checkers were tested by seeing how well they could assess 45 standardized patient descriptions. The team found that the checkers listed the correct diagnosis as the first option in only 34% of cases. The correct diagnosis was within the top 20 possible diagnoses 58% of the time.

The checkers provided helpful triage advice in 57% of the cases. Triage performance was most accurate in emergencies, with appropriate advice given in 80% of cases. Some symptom checkers provided more accurate advice than others.

Overall, the checkers tended to be cautious, encouraging users to seek health care when self care would do.

"These tools may be useful in patients who are trying to decide whether they should get to a doctor quickly," says lead author Dr. Ateev Mehrotra of Harvard Medical School. "But in many cases, users should be cautious and not take the information they receive from online symptom checkers as gospel."

As symptom checkers become more accurate, they could reduce unneeded trips to the hospital and be more cost-effective than nurse-staffed phone lines. ■

Health Newsletter for Native Americans

A new online newsletter, called *Honoring Health: Resources for American Indians and Alaska Natives*, features a different health topic in each issue. The e-newsletter highlights health-related resources, events, training, and funding opportunities from NIH and other federal agencies.

The first issue focuses on healthy aging. Learn about NIH's *Go4Life* campaign, designed to help older adults add exercise and physical activity to their daily lives. The debut newsletter also includes links to information about Alzheimer's

disease and a toolkit that can help older adults learn to make the most of their medical appointments.

Honoring Health: Resources for American Indians and Alaska Natives is produced by NIH in partnership with the Indian Health Service and the Administration for Community Living's Administration on Aging—all part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

To subscribe to this free email newsletter, visit www.niams.nih.gov/News_and_Events/AIAN_Honoring_Health. ■

Featured Website Body Weight Planner

BWPlanner.niddk.nih.gov

This online tool can accurately forecast how your body weight changes when you alter your diet and exercise habits. It's based on a mathematical model developed by NIH researchers and is now part of USDA's SuperTracker, an online goal-setting resource to help people achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

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