

Healthy cooking tips

Eating healthy food doesn't mean giving up your favourite foods. Your favourite recipes can be adapted easily to provide a healthier alternative. For example, non-stick cookware can be used to reduce the need for cooking oil. Vegetables can also be microwaved or steamed instead of boiling to keep valuable nutrition.

There are many ways to make meals healthier. Limit fats, sugars and salt and include plenty of vegetables, fruit, grains, lean meats and low-fat dairy in your cooking. Foods with added fats, sugars or salt are less healthy than food in which these are found naturally.

Keep fats to a minimum

Choose lean meats and reduced-fat dairy products and limit processed foods to minimise hidden fats. Nuts, seeds, fish, soy, olives and avocado are all healthier options because they include the essential long-chain fatty acids and these fats are accompanied by other good nutrients.

If you add fats when cooking, keep them to a minimum and use monounsaturated oils such as olive and canola oil.

Shopping for healthy food

Low-fat cooking begins when you are shopping:

- Choose the reduced or low-fat version of a food if possible – for example milk, cheese, yoghurt, salad dressings and gravies.
- Choose lean meat cuts and skinless chicken breasts.
- Limit fast foods, chips, crisps, processed meats, pastries and pies, which all contain large amounts of fat.

Low fat cooking

Suggestions include:

- If you need to use oil, try cooking sprays or apply a small amount of oil with a pastry brush.
- Cook in liquids (such as stock, wine, lemon juice, fruit juice, vinegar or water) instead of oil.
- Use low-fat yoghurt, low-fat milk, evaporated skim milk or cornstarch instead of cream in sauces or soups.
- When browning vegetables, put them in a hot pan then spray with oil, rather than adding the oil first to the pan. This reduces the amount of oil that vegetables absorb during cooking.
- An alternative to browning vegetables by pan-frying is to cook them first in the microwave, then crisp them under the grill for a minute or two.
- Use pesto, salsas, chutneys and vinegars in place of sour creams, butter and creamy sauces.

Retaining the nutrients

Water-soluble vitamins are delicate and easily destroyed during preparation and cooking. To minimise nutrient losses:

- Scrub vegetables rather than peel them, as many nutrients are found close to the skin.
- Microwave or steam vegetables instead of boiling them.
- If you like to boil vegetables, use a small amount of water and do not overboil them.
- Include more stir-fry recipes in your diet. Stir-fried vegetables are cooked quickly to retain their crunch (and associated nutrients).

Cutting down salt

Salt is a common flavour enhancer, but research suggests that a high salt diet could contribute to a range of health problems including high blood pressure. Suggestions to reduce salt include:

- Don't automatically add salt to your food – taste it first.
- Add a splash of olive oil, vinegar or lemon juice close to the end of cooking time or to cooked vegetables – it can enhance flavours in the same way as salt.
- Choose fresh or frozen vegetables, since canned and pickled vegetables tend to be packaged with salt.
- Limit your consumption of salty processed meats such as salami, ham, corned beef, bacon, smoked salmon, frankfurters and chicken loaf.
- Choose reduced salt bread and breakfast cereals. Breads and cereals are a major source of salt in the diet.
- Iodised salt is best. A major dietary source of iodine is plant foods. Yet there is emerging evidence that Australian soil may be low in iodine and so plants grown in it are also low in iodine. If you eat fish at least once a week, the need for iodised salt is reduced.
- Avoid salt-laden processed foods, such as flavoured instant pasta or noodles, canned or dehydrated soup mixes, chips and salted nuts.
- Margarine and butter contain a lot of salt but 'no added salt' varieties are available.
- Most cheeses are very high in salt so limit your intake or choose lower salt varieties.
- Reduce your use of soy sauce, tomato sauce and processed sauces and condiments (for example mayonnaise and salad dressings) because they contain high levels of salt.

Herbs

Culinary herbs are leafy plants that add flavour and colour to all types of meals. They are also rich in health-protective phyto-oestrogens. In many cases, herbs can replace the flavour of salt and oil.

Remember:

- Herbs are delicately flavoured, so add them to your cooking in the last few minutes.
- Dried herbs are more strongly flavoured than fresh. As a general rule, one teaspoon of dried herbs equals four teaspoons of fresh.
- Apart from boosting meat dishes, herbs can be added to soups, breads, mustards, salad dressings, vinegars, desserts and drinks.
- Herbs such as coriander, ginger, garlic, chilli and lemongrass are especially complimentary in vegetable-based stir-fry recipes.

Sandwich suggestions

To make a sandwich even healthier:

- Switch to reduced salt wholemeal or wholegrain bread.
- Limit high-fat spreads such as butter or margarine. You won't miss butter if your sandwich has a few tasty ingredients already.
- Use plenty of vegetable or salad fillings
- Limit your use of spreads high in saturated fat like butter and cream cheese. Replace them with a thin spread of peanut butter or other nut spreads, hummus, low-fat cheese spreads or avocado.
- Choose reduced fat ingredients when you can, such as low-fat cheese or mayonnaise.
- Try to reduce your use of processed meats. Instead use fish such as salmon, tuna or sardines.
- Enjoy toasted sandwiches with baked beans.

General suggestions for healthy cooking

Healthy cooking methods include:

- Steam, bake, grill, braise, boil or microwave your foods.
- Modify or eliminate recipes that include butter or ask you to deep fry or sauté in animal fat.
- Avoid added oils and butter; use non-stick cookware instead.
- Don't add salt to food as it is cooking.
- Remove chicken skin and trim the fat from meat.
- Eat more fresh vegetables and legumes.
- Eat more fish, which is high in protein, low in fats and loaded with essential omega-3 fatty acids.

Other tips

Suggestions include:

- Spend a little time on presentation. You are more likely to enjoy a meal if it's visually appealing as well as tasty.
- Make every meal an occasion. Set the table. Eat with your family. Give yourself the opportunity to enjoy your food without distractions like television.
- Long-term deprivation, such as crash dieting, doesn't work. Allow yourself the occasional guilt-free treat.
- You are less likely to overeat if you eat slowly and savour every mouthful.

Where to get help

- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Your doctor

Things to remember

- In many cases, favourite recipes can be modified so they offer a lower fat content.
- Choose to steam, bake, grill, braise, boil or microwave your foods, rather than deep fry them.
- Use non-stick cookware.
- Microwave or steam your vegetables instead of boiling them to retain the nutrients.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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