



Food and nutrition – eating a balanced diet

At a glance

- Your body needs food to grow, develop, learn, stay active, and do all the things you want to do.
- It's important to eat enough food every day.
- Aim to eat a varied and balanced diet with a mix of vegetables, fruits, proteins, grains, and dairy.
- Try to drink about six to eight cups of water a day.
- Your body will usually tell you if you are hungry.
- It's not a good idea to diet as a teen.

Read the parent fact sheet (www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Nutrition_-_teens_and_young_people/)

Fuelling your body for life

The human body uses food as fuel to grow and develop. As a teen, your body is always changing, so nutrition is extra important.

Your parents or caregivers probably chose the food you ate when you were younger. But as you get older, you might start making more choices about your eating habits – whether that's eating out more or learning to cook and prepare your meals.

Why does food matter?

You can't live without food. This might seem obvious, but it's important to remember that your body needs food and nutrition for everything, including:

- things you can see, like moving, playing sports, and doing your schoolwork
- things you can't see, like repairing and building cells, strengthening your bones, and building your muscles
- things you might feel, like your energy levels or your mood.

There is a lot of confusing information online about food and nutrition. Put simply, your growing body needs a certain amount of nutrients and kilojoules (or calories) every day. The exact numbers depend on things like your age and activity levels.

What are nutrients and why do I need them?

Nutrients are the things that make up food. During digestion, your body breaks the food you eat into its nutrients and uses them to:

- give you energy
- build and repair your cells, bones, muscles, nerves, and tissues
- regulate body functions like your heartbeat.

There are two main groups of nutrients:

1. **Macronutrients (big nutrients):** Nutrients you need in large amounts, like carbohydrates, proteins, and fats.
2. **Micronutrients (small nutrients):** Nutrients you need in smaller amounts, like vitamins and minerals.

Your body needs macro and micronutrients to live and grow. Many foods have both nutrient groups. For example, fish is a good source of protein, but it also has iron, calcium, and vitamin D.

Key nutrients for young people

Some nutrients are more important for teens than others. Here are three examples:

Iron

Iron helps to carry oxygen around your body and fight infections. You absorb iron best from red meat, chicken, and seafood. You can also get it from eggs, nuts, lentils and beans, dried fruit, and leafy green vegetables, but it's not as easy to absorb from these foods. Low iron levels might make you feel tired, weak, and dizzy. If you get periods (https://www.rch.org.au/teeninfo/fact-sheets/Periods_%E2%80%93_owning_your_cycle/), you might have lower iron.

Calcium

Calcium helps build strong bones and ensures your muscles and nerves work properly. Your teen years are the most critical for building bone strength – the bones you build between ages 13 and 25 need to last your whole life. Dairy products like cheese, milk and yoghurt have the most calcium.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium to build strong bones and muscles. It's in eggs and some fish, and added to foods like milk and cereals. But only a fraction of the body's vitamin D comes from food; your skin makes most of it when it's exposed to sunlight. Many teens have low Vitamin D levels and might need supplements.

What sort of foods should I eat?

The main thing to remember when it comes to food is balance. Having a 'balanced' diet means eating a mix of foods from the 'five food groups.' These are:

1. **Vegetables and legumes/beans** – aim for five serves a day
 - One serve = Half a cup of cooked vegetables or one cup of raw vegetables.
2. **Fruit** – aim for two serves a day
 - One serve = One whole piece of fruit, several smaller fruits or a handful of little fruits like berries or grapes.
3. **Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain** – aim for five to seven serves a day
 - One serve = One slice of bread or half a cup of cooked rice.
4. **Lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, nuts and seeds** – aim for two and a half serves a day
 - One serve = One small can of tuna or two large eggs.
5. **Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives** – aim for three and a half serves a day
 - One serve = One glass of milk, two slices of cheese or one small tub of yoghurt.

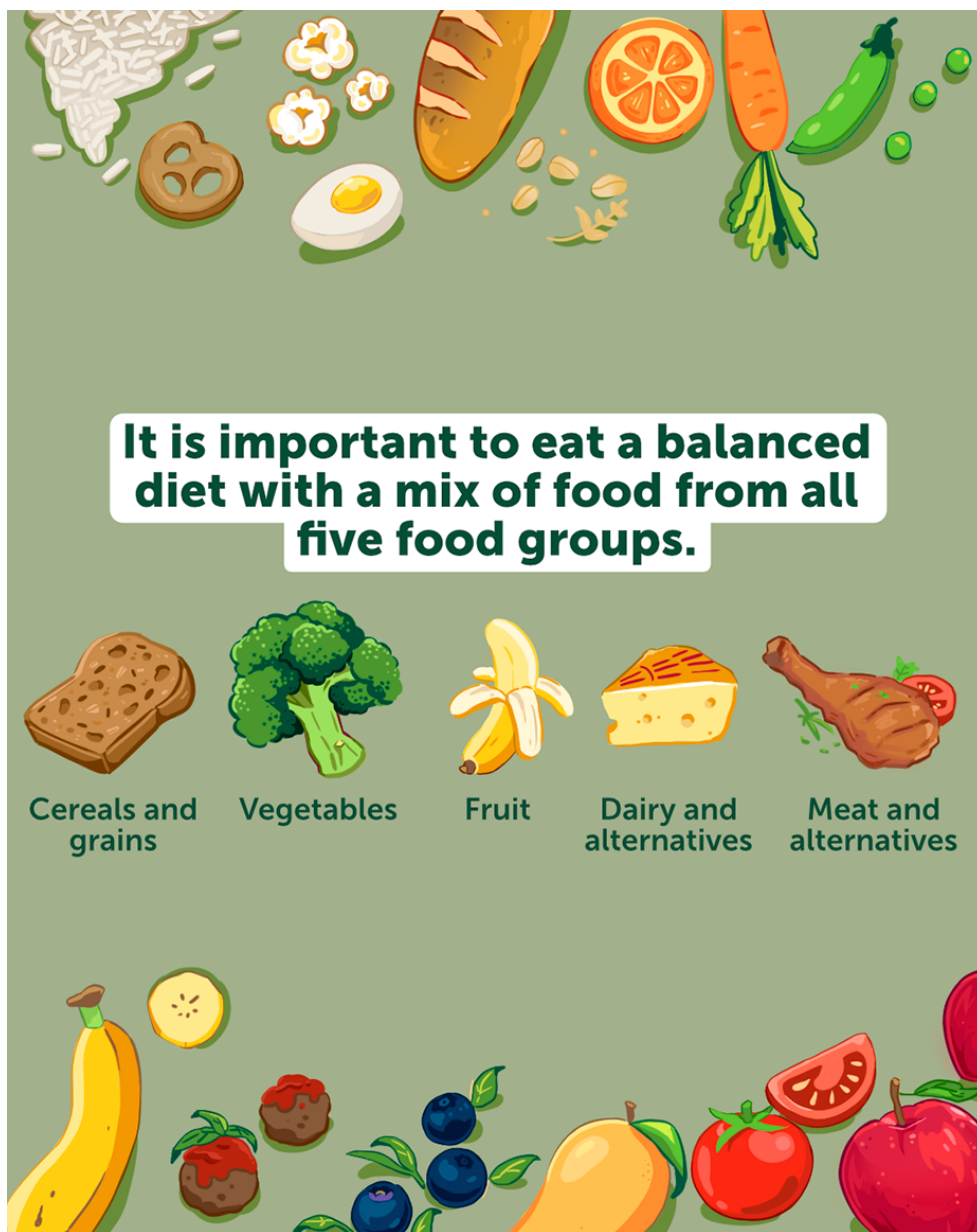


Figure one: Illustration of the five food groups.

If your diet is balanced, you will feel more satisfied after eating and get all the nutrients your body needs. You don't need to eat food made a certain way or avoid any cooking methods. Every culture has different traditions and recipes; the ingredients are the important part.

What are processed foods?

There's lots of confusing information online about food processing. The main thing to know is 'processing' is what happens to a food before you eat it and why.

Experts usually put foods into four processing groups:

- **Unprocessed foods** = Any foods in their natural state, like fresh fruits and vegetables. They are also called 'whole foods.' Minimally processed foods are changed a little from their natural state. This is usually so they last longer or are safer to eat. Sometimes, they are changed through drying, roasting, boiling or other processes.
- **Processed culinary ingredients** = Any foods changed from their natural state so they can be used in a certain way. For example, olives are turned into olive oil. They are not usually eaten on their own.
- **Processed foods** = Any foods changed from their natural state that can usually be eaten on their own. They are often safer, tastier, last longer, or easier to eat. For example, canned tuna in oil.

- **Ultra-processed foods** = Ready-to-eat foods made in factories. They usually have lots of ingredients you don't use at home, such as colour and flavour enhancers, along with preservatives that make them last a long time without going bad. Hot dogs, instant noodles, and flavoured potato chips are all ultra-processed foods.

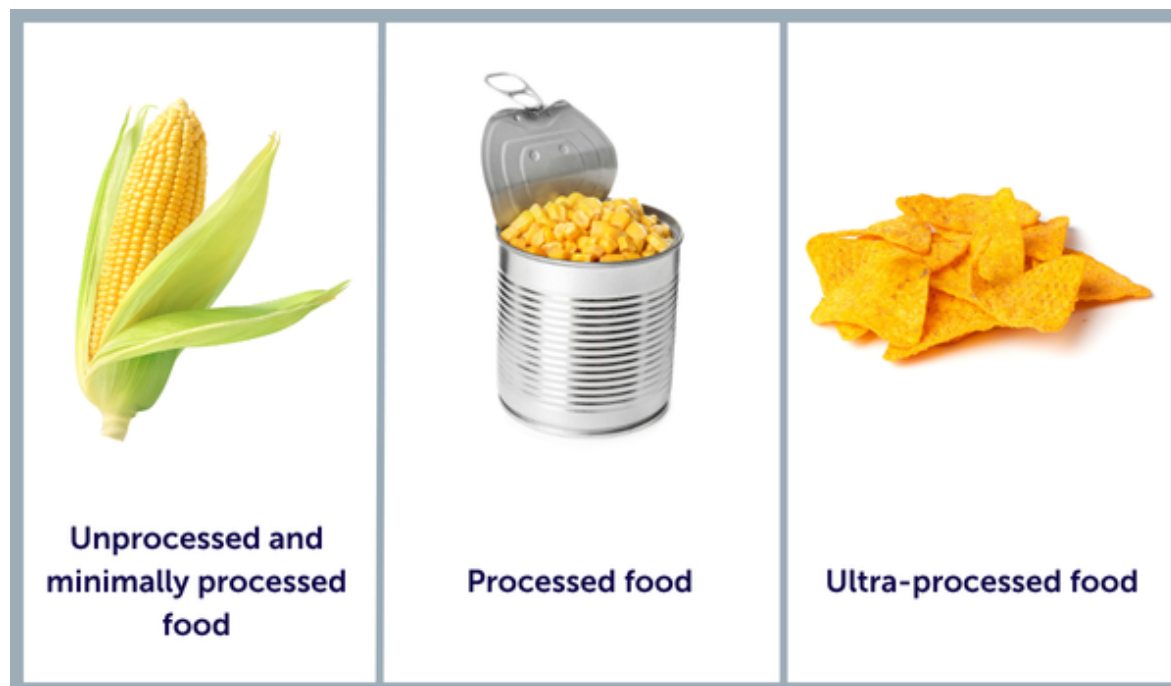


Figure one: Image showing three different forms of corn, from unprocessed to ultra-processed.

Processing can take away nutrients like fibre, water, vitamins, and minerals, and add things like salt and sugar. So, try to eat as much unprocessed and minimally processed food as possible. For example, a freshly sliced tomato on a sandwich has more nutrients than tomato sauce. This is because a sliced tomato has more vitamins, fibre, and water. Tomato sauce often has added salt and sugar, too.

Don't set strict rules about foods you 'can' or 'can't' eat, and be flexible day-to-day. Even processed foods like chocolate and chips can be part of a balanced diet if you eat them sometimes.

Fortified foods

Companies might add nutrients to foods to boost their benefits. This could mean adding nutrients that are not naturally in foods, or adding more of the nutrients only found in small amounts. These are called 'fortified foods.' Breakfast cereals are popular fortified foods; they often have added iron and vitamins.

Drinking water

Water is the most important nutrient (<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/water-a-vital-nutrient>) of all. The body can only survive a few days without it. Water affects many processes, from helping you digest food to balancing salt and nutrient levels. Make sure to drink enough water every day – usually about six to eight cups, or 1.5 to 2L (litres). Try to drink more if the weather is hot or you are very active.

Limit how often you have sugary or sweetened drinks, like soft drinks and juice, and try not to drink coffee, energy drinks, and [alcohol](http://www.rch.org.au/teeninfo/fact-sheets/Alcohol_and_other_drugs_-_what_you_need_to_know/) (www.rch.org.au/teeninfo/fact-sheets/Alcohol_and_other_drugs_-_what_you_need_to_know/).

How much food should I eat?

There is no perfect amount of food for teens to eat. Everybody is different, and what you need depends on your age, height, how much you are growing, and how active you are.

Most teens need three meals and two or three snacks each day, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy, protein and grains or cereals. Your body will usually tell you if you are eating enough. In most cases, if you feel hungry, you should eat until you are full.

If you exercise often or play lots of sports, you might need to eat more food to feel full. Chat with your local doctor (general practitioner, or 'GP') or a registered dietitian for advice.

Vegan and plant-based diets

Some teens choose to eat plant-based diets. This could be for religious, cultural, ethical or climate reasons. Sometimes, it's just because they don't like the taste of animal products.

The most common plant-based diets are:

Vegetarian

- No meat or seafood
- Focus on plant-based foods like fruits and vegetables
- Usually still includes dairy and eggs.

Pescatarian

- No meat, but allows for seafood
- Focus on plant-based foods like fruits and vegetables
- Usually still includes dairy, eggs and fish.

Vegan

- Excludes all meat, seafood and animal products
- Focus on plant foods
- Does not include dairy and eggs.

Before starting a plant-based diet (<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/vegetarian-and-vegan-eating>), it's best to ask your GP or a dietitian for advice. They will work with you to make sure you get all the nutrients you need and might suggest supplements to fill any gaps. Nutrients like iron and calcium can be harder to get in plant-based diets.

Think about how plant-based eating might change your meals and lifestyle. For example, you will need to think about everything you eat, read food labels, have extra health appointments, and consider adding fortified foods or supplements to your diet.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is an essential nutrient for your nerves, blood cells and brain function. It's only naturally found in animal products. This means you can't get vitamin B12 from vegan foods unless they are fortified with B12. If you follow a vegan diet, you will need to eat fortified foods and/or take a supplement to get enough vitamin B12.

Most people have enough vitamin B12 stored in their bodies for several years, but untreated low vitamin B12 levels can be dangerous. Speak with your GP if you are worried about your vitamin B12 intake.

Building healthy food habits

- Listen to trusted sources.
 - It's best to get nutrition advice from a doctor or a registered specialist, such as a dietitian.
 - Before following any nutrition advice online, stop and ask yourself – does this person have evidence to back up what they are saying? Or are they trying to make money by promoting something?
- Take it back to basics.
 - Instead of worrying about your daily protein intake or other specific nutrients, zoom out and look at your diet as a whole. Are you eating a mix of food from the five food groups each day? If so, you are on the right track.
 - Try not to think of food as 'good' or 'bad' – focus on its nutritional benefits.

- Get involved with what you eat.
 - Choose recipes, help with grocery shopping, and make your own snacks. Think: veggies and hummus or bowls of fruit and yoghurt.
- Learn how to cook.
 - Start with the basics, such as chopping vegetables safely. It's a good idea to ask a trusted adult to show you.
 - Explore online resources, such as recipes and video tutorials. These are great ways to learn before you try. You might learn some handy tricks, too.
 - Pick simple recipes to start with. Pasta, soup, and dahl (lentil curry) are great beginner-friendly dishes. You can choose more complex recipes as you get more comfortable.
 - Don't be afraid to ask questions.
 - Try to cook regularly. Cooking is like a muscle; it gets easier the more you practice.

Things you might be wondering

Is breakfast really the most important meal of the day?

You might have heard mixed messages about breakfast. Some say skipping breakfast is bad for your health, while others say it's better. In reality, one meal is probably no more important than any other. Just remember: skipping breakfast might make it harder to focus in the morning and get enough nutrients in the day.

Should I worry about eating too many calories?

Doctors and dietitians don't usually suggest teens count calories. Instead, focus on eating a mix of foods from all five good groups and prioritise unprocessed foods. Crash diets, fad diets, and fasting are also not recommended for teens. If you are worried about your diet or body weight, speak with your GP or a dietitian for advice.

What do macronutrients do in the body?

Macronutrients play many key roles in the body. The three main types are carbohydrates, proteins, and fats (<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/fats-and-oils>). Carbohydrates are the body's main energy source. You can get them from lots of foods, like rice, bananas, and yoghurt. Protein helps build muscle; you can get it from chicken, eggs, and nuts like almonds. Fats support your heart health. Foods like avocado and tuna have lots of healthy fats.

Can food give me acne?

Multiple factors usually cause acne (https://www.rch.org.au/teeninfo/fact-sheets/Pimples_and_skin_health/), not just food alone. Some research shows that diets with lots of foods that spike blood sugar – also known as high-glycaemic index (high GI) foods – can contribute to acne. Common high-GI foods include sugary soft drinks, white bread, and processed snacks like chips. If you have acne and eat lots of high-GI foods, it's best to chat with your GP or a dietitian.

Some foods make me feel sick and bloated. Should I avoid eating them?

Before cutting out any foods, you should always see your GP or a dietitian. Often, symptoms like bloating, feeling sick, stomach pain, constipation, and diarrhoea are not caused by food. Your GP can help you rule out more serious causes, so you don't have to cut any foods and miss out on nutrients. You could talk to your GP about allergy testing if you notice rashes or more serious symptoms with certain foods.

Can medical conditions affect your diet?

Not everyone gets their nutrients the same way. Some conditions might affect what you can eat, how you can eat or what you want to eat. For example, people with conditions where their organs don't absorb nutrients properly might need to avoid certain foods or get their nutrients from a tube (tube-feeding).

Is there such a thing as 'good' and 'bad' food?

Try not to label certain foods as 'good' or 'bad.' Some foods you might have heard called 'bad' can help your body in other ways. For example, chocolate can make your brain release chemicals linked to happiness. All foods nourish your body differently and can be part of a balanced diet.

What happens if I don't drink enough water?

Most teens should drink about six to eight cups of water every day. If you're very active or it's hot, you should drink more. If you don't drink enough water, your body won't work properly and can get dehydrated (<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/dehydration>). At first, dehydration might make you thirsty or your mouth dry. You might also get a headache, feel dizzy or notice your pee (urine) looks darker than usual. Severe dehydration can be very dangerous.

Helpful links

- [Continue reading Teen Health Info fact sheets \(www.rch.org.au/teeninfo/fact_sheets/\)](http://www.rch.org.au/teeninfo/fact_sheets/)
- [Teen Health Info: Words you hear in the health system \(www.rch.org.au/teeninfo/fact-sheets/Words_you_hear_in_the_health_system/\)](http://www.rch.org.au/teeninfo/fact-sheets/Words_you_hear_in_the_health_system/)
- [Eatforhealth: The five food groups \(https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/food-essentials/five-food-groups\)](https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/food-essentials/five-food-groups)
- [BetterHealth: Iron and iron deficiency \(https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/iron#food-sources-of-iron\)](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/iron#food-sources-of-iron)
- [Better Health: Water – a vital nutrient \(https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/water-a-vital-nutrient\)](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/water-a-vital-nutrient)
- [Raising Children Network: Dietary guidelines in pictures \(14–18 years\) \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/daily-food-guides/dietary-guide-14-18-years\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/daily-food-guides/dietary-guide-14-18-years)
- [The Women's: Food and nutrition for adolescents \(https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-information/staying-well/adolescent-girls/food-and-nutrition-for-adolescents\)](https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-information/staying-well/adolescent-girls/food-and-nutrition-for-adolescents)

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