



College Preparation Toolkit

Healthy Eating: Good Intentions

Maybe you started out with healthy goals at dinnertime: some steamed vegetables with your lasagna, a heaping bowl of greens from the salad bar. But as you headed to a table, the fries caught your eye. Then you decided you'd better hit the desserts now, because who knows what will be left when you're done with dinner?

Sound familiar? You're away at college, and your parents are no longer looking over your shoulder to make sure you eat your vegetables. This and many other new freedoms might feel great. But they may not be good news for your body.

While many students stock up on fruits and vegetables in the dining hall, others fill their trays with things they like without paying much attention to what their bodies need. Even people with the best intentions can sometimes find it difficult to resist the less-healthy options.

Your waistline's not the only thing at stake. The foods you choose affect your energy, concentration, and memory, because your body and brain need the right nutrition to function properly.

So before you reach for a soda or another slice of pizza, remember that smart choices from the different food groups will help you feel your best.

What Does Your Body Need?

Nutritional requirements vary from person to person, depending on age, sex, size, level of activity, and other factors. For specific recommendations suited to your needs, talk to a doctor, registered dietitian, or your student health office or nutritional counselor at your university.

Nutrition experts recommend a balanced diet that includes:

- whole grains
- vegetables
- fruit
- lean meats, fish and other healthy sources of protein
- low-fat or nonfat dairy

Watch out for snack foods that tend to be high in sugar, fats, and calories. They should only play a small role in your overall diet.

Choosing Carbs

Whole-grain carbohydrates — such as brown rice and whole-grain breads, cereals, and pasta — are better choices than their more processed counterparts (like white rice, white bread and regular pasta). Whole grain foods retain more vitamins, minerals, and fiber.

Choosing Veggies (and Fruit)

Canned or frozen vegetables and fruits sometimes contain added salt, sauces, or sugar. Read the labels carefully or choose fresh vegetables and fruits. Even though fruit and vegetables are often referred to as one food group, don't skip your vegetables in favor of fruit. (You should actually eat more vegetables than fruit for an ideal balance.)

Choosing Protein

Protein is another essential part of any diet that should not be overlooked. You can choose lean meats, fish, poultry, eggs, or other sources such as dry beans (kidney beans, chick peas, and lentils, to name a few) nuts, and seeds.

Choosing Dairy

Dairy products like cheese, yogurt, and milk also provide protein, as well as much-needed calcium. But they also can be high in fat. Choose low-fat or nonfat dairy products most of the time.

Snack Attacks

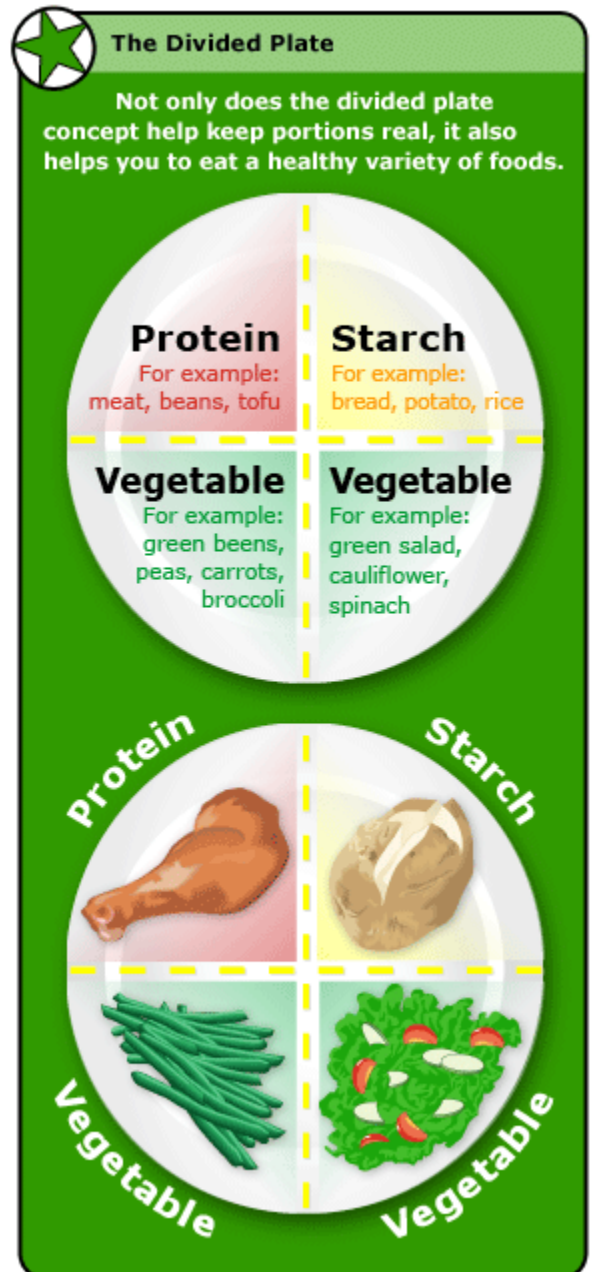
Sometimes, though, those fatty or sugary foods are just what you crave. When you've been up for hours studying, you might look to chips, candy, or soda, because you think they'll give you a boost. Plus, they're readily available and easy to grab. But you may want to consider healthier alternatives that can give you more energy with fewer negative consequences.

If you need a solid snack, consider popcorn (avoid too much butter, salt, or kettle corn with added sugar). Or if you're really hungry, a combination of protein and carbohydrates will satisfy you longer than high-fat or sugary snacks. Try an apple and peanut butter, yogurt mixed with low-fat granola, or a tortilla with cheese, heated in the microwave and topped with salsa.

Meeting Special Dietary Needs

Vegetarians and students with food allergies, medical conditions like diabetes, or special religious requirements may find it harder to get by in a dining hall, although most schools make an effort to meet their needs. Dining hall meals typically feature several choices for a main course, one of which is usually vegetarian.

Vegetarian meals often help meet the needs of both vegetarians and students with religious requirements. Another option is to make a meal out of side dishes. Combine a baked potato topped with low-fat cheese and some steamed vegetables and serve with a salad sprinkled with chopped nuts for a filling meal. Sample soups, fruit, yogurt, pasta, and other foods for more selections.



If you have special dietary requirements — especially medical ones — you may need to talk to the manager of the dining hall or to someone in student services to request certain foods. Students with food allergies need to know the ingredients that go into the dishes they enjoy — not to mention they have to be careful that foods haven't been cross-contaminated with possible allergens like nuts or shellfish.

Portion Sizes

Our bodies can't always tell us when enough is enough. One study found that people who are given larger portions tend to eat more food, no matter how hungry they are. So pay attention to what you're eating and stop when you start to feel full.

The appropriate amount of food a person should eat depends on age, gender, and activity level. A portion is the amount of food a person chooses to eat, and as a general rule it should not be larger than a fist. The divided plate concept also can help you control portion sizes.

Portion Size Recommendations

If you're concerned about your weight, you may want to stick to the following serving size guidelines:

- A protein portion is about the size of your palm.
- A serving of milk is 8 fluid ounces (1 cup).
- One piece of bread or half a bagel is one grain serving. So when you eat a sandwich you are actually getting two servings of grain.
- A serving of cooked pasta is ½ cup. Try to limit pasta, rice, potato portions to the size of your fist (about 1 cup or 2 servings)
- Limit nuts and snack foods to a handful — about a ¼ cup.
- A serving of vegetables is only ½ cup. But because most are low in calories and high in nutrients, you can pile on the veggies and be on your way to getting the recommended number of servings each day. Veggies are also high in fiber, so they help to fill you up.

Do what you can to stick to these recommendations and resist the temptation to overfill your plate. The more you put on your plate, the more you are likely to eat.

Overcoming Common Dining Hall Mistakes

Even the most attentive diners can still make mistakes while filling their plates. For the best results at mealtime, follow a few simple guidelines:

Take the right approach to food.

Don't feel guilty if you have a cheeseburger and French fries or a piece of cake. Instead of thinking of foods as "bad" or "good," most experts say moderation is the key. Just pay attention to the size of the portions you take and how often you eat that food. Try not to get caught up in counting every calorie. It's more important to concentrate on getting the nutrients you need by eating a wide variety of food and including plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.

Check your fluids.

Be sure you stay hydrated throughout the day — and several cups of coffee or servings of soda don't count. The caffeine in sodas and coffee is a diuretic (which means it makes you urinate more) and

sodas, juice drinks, and sports drinks are loaded with sugar, which can add up to extra pounds. Instead, drink water and low-fat or nonfat milk.

Go for variety

Try not to eat the same one or two foods all the time — or take three of your food groups from the dessert counter! It's healthier to focus on getting a variety of fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, whole grain, and low fat dairy. Try to include at least 3 food groups or think of the divided plate when planning your meal: Fill half your plate with vegetables. Add a piece of fish (protein) and brown rice (starch) to round out your meal.

Don't linger

Dining halls are like endless buffets. You can sit for hours, and the longer you sit the more you can eat. Try to avoid hanging out in the dining hall for too long so you don't eat more than your body needs.

Stock up on healthy snacks

Most dining halls will let you take fruit or other healthy snacks with you when you leave. Slip an apple or an orange into your bag to help you resist the late-night lure of the vending machine later on.

Where to Get More Advice

Learning more about nutrition can help you make better choices about what you put in your body. Talk to a dietician or someone on the school's health services staff for suggestions.

When you turn to the Web for facts, choose carefully. Some sites may promote nutritional fads or give information that is incorrect. Your school's website may be a good place to start. Many universities offer online health and nutrition information tailored to students.

As you educate yourself about nutrition, making smart choices in the dining hall will become second nature.

While you're paying attention to food, think about fitness, too. Make an effort to work in at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day (like brisk walking, running, swimming, or working out at the gym). Look for opportunities to be active with friends, too — like a pickup game of basketball or disc golf in the quad. Pairing exercise with healthy foods will help fuel both your body and your mind.

Reviewed by: [Mary L. Gavin, MD](#)

Date reviewed: November 2010