



AASPIRE

Healthcare Toolkit

Staying Healthy: Nutrition

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Staying Healthy: Nutrition

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1 What is this topic about?

A healthy diet can help improve or keep up good health. A healthy diet may also lower the risk for some chronic health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. A healthy diet means eating the right amounts of the right nutrients, and drinking the right amount of water. Nutrients can come from many different foods. Everyone's bodies are a little different, and there are many ways to have a healthy diet. This section gives some links to basic information about healthy diet and nutrition.

2 What kind of diet is healthy for me?

There is no single diet that is best for all people. Some people like to stick to a particular diet, like a vegan, low carbohydrate, paleo, anti-inflammatory, or Mediterranean diet. It's okay if you do not want to follow a particular diet. Following some general healthy eating guidelines is all you need to do.

General Guidelines

Vegetables - Try to make about half your plate be vegetables at every meal.

Variety - Eat a variety of types of food, especially vegetables

and fruits. Different foods have different amounts of nutrients that you need. If you only eat a couple types of foods you may be missing several important nutrients.

Whole Grains - If you eat something with grains (breads, pasta, rice, etc.) choose "whole grain" options when possible (whole grain bread, whole grain pasta, brown rice, etc.)

Beverages - It is easy to get extra calories from things you drink. This can cause weight gain. Drinks like soda, coffee based drinks, milk shakes, juice, and alcohol all have lots of added sugars and fat. Healthier options are to drink water, black coffee, or unsweetened tea.

Juice - Many of us were told that juice is healthy because it is from fruit. Unfortunately this is not true. Juice can have more sugar than a candy bar! Sugar is often added to fruit juice. Also, by drinking the juice, you are only getting the sugary fluid from the fruit. This means you are missing many important nutrients, like fiber, from the rest of the fruit. If you do drink fruit juice, try to find labels that say, "100% fruit."

Snacks - If you know you are going to need a snack before your next meal, try to keep a healthy snack easily available. This helps you stay away from chips or candy as snacks. Here are some quick healthy snack ideas:

- Nuts (unsalted, not candied) - Nuts are good sources of healthy fats, protein, and minerals. Eat up to a handful a day.
- Fruit - a piece of whole fruit is a good way to have something sweet and healthy. Whole fruits have lots of fiber, vitamins, and minerals. If you are hungrier, try putting some type of nut butter on your fruit, like peanut or almond butter.
- Hard boiled eggs - these can last a week in the refrigerator. You can take them to school or work. When you're ready to eat, you can peel the shell off. Eggs are good sources of protein, B-vitamins, phosphorus, and selenium. [Here's how to cook them.](#)

Sweets - Sweet foods, breads, and pastas are mostly made of carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are important for your body to get

quick energy. This also means that carbohydrates are digested faster and you will feel hungry again sooner. Eating meals mostly with carbohydrates can also spike your blood sugar. To avoid this, try to include healthy fats and proteins any time you eat something with a lot of carbohydrates. This makes sure you get your short-term and long-term energy sources at each meal.

Planning Ahead - In general, eating meals you make at home are healthier than meals you buy at restaurants or fast food places. This is because you can control the ingredients that are in the foods you make yourself. Often we eat out or get fast food when we haven't prepared something already at home or are busy and stressed. One way to avoid this is to plan ahead. Pick a day to make your meals for the rest of the week and freeze them. That way you only have to cook once! This way you know that you have a quick meal ready that you made. This also helps save you money from eating out. Examples: make large batches of stew, curry, burritos, and stir-fry. These things are easy to store in the fridge or freezer and eat later in the week.

Read Labels - Read the labels of the foods you eat. Just reading the nutrition labels and ingredients lists helps you know what you are eating and can help you make better food choices.

Specific Healthy Diets *Mediterranean Diet* This is one of the best researched diets for reducing the risk of chronic disease and maintaining health. The basic concepts are:

- Base your meals on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, olive oil, beans, nuts, legumes, and seeds.
- Use seafood, poultry, and other lean meats as your main sources of meat.
- Limit the amount of red meats and sugars.

Ornish Diet (Ornish Spectrum) -The Ornish diet was developed by Dean Ornish, MD based on different nutrition research. Foods are categorized into 5 groups. Foods in Group 1 are considered the healthiest. Foods in Group 5 are considered the least healthy. These

categories help you decide how much of healthy or unhealthy foods you want to eat. Learn more at ornishspectrum.com.

Links to other guidelines and general information about nutrition and healthy diets:

[Recipes for Healthy Living](#) created by the American Diabetes Association has tools and tips for people with and without diabetes including: Information on how to make a healthy meal, recipes with nutrition content, healthy and budget-friendly meals, customizable food plans with grocery lists. The American Heart Association has [diet and lifestyle recommendations](#) to reduce the risk of heart disease including: how many calories to eat, blood pressure and cholesterol advice, and information on individual food groups, fish, and sugar. The Harvard School of Public Health [Nutrition Source](#) has information on healthy foods, beverages, and exercises, as well as a "healthy eating plate" to visualize food group portions. [LiveStrong.com](#) has a lot of different tools and articles to help with diet, nutrition, and exercise, including:

- Detailed information about nutrition [Livestrong](#)
- A page where you can browse [recipes](#) for healthy food based on your own food preferences (includes detailed nutritional information)
- A [food tracker](#) where you can keep track of what you eat

Online and phone apps to track what you eat: [MyFitnessPal](#), [My Food Diary](#), [My Net Diary](#).

3 Where can I find specific details on individual foods or nutrients?

[NutritionData.com](#) has tools and information to understand and analyze nutrition, including

- Information about what nutrients are in which foods

- A daily nutritional needs calculator based on your sex, age, weight, and activity level
- Detailed information about special health diets such as diabetic or heart diets

The [Linus Pauling Micronutrient Information Center](#) has detailed, technical information on many nutrients found in food, as well as symptoms from not getting enough—or getting too much—of a nutrient. It also has summaries about research on nutrition in specific medical conditions. *NOTE: This site has a lot of information, but is not written in a way that is easy to understand. The information is very technical and uses a lot of jargon.*

4 How much water do I really need to drink?

It is hard to know how much water people need to drink. Many people have heard that you should drink 8 glasses of water a day. Some people may need more or less though depending on how big they are. Also, the food you eat gives you some water, so how much extra you need to drink depends on what you are eating. The Institute of Medicine estimates that adult men need to drink an average of 3.7 liters (125 oz) daily and adult women need to drink about 2.7 liters (91 oz) of water daily. A different way to figure out how much water you might need is to take your body weight in pounds, divide it half, and that's the number of ounces you should drink (for example, a 150 lb person would drink 75 oz of water a day: $150/2=75$). Exercise, hot weather, or illness: There are a number of things that can cause you to need more fluids. One is exercising. Another is being in hot weather conditions. Illnesses can also make you lose fluids if you have diarrhea, vomiting, or a high fever with sweats. In those situations, you need to drink more fluids and replace your electrolytes (the salts that are naturally in your body). Some examples of drinks with electrolytes are Gatorade or Poweraid. One way to know if you are drinking enough water is to check your urine. It should be a clear or

pale/light yellow. If it is darker you may need to drink more water. Certain medications and medical conditions can also make your urine look darker.

5 What should I do if I want to lose weight?

A goal of losing 1 pound a week is recommended for most people who wish to lose weight. Losing more weight is not sustainable for most people because it requires more drastic lifestyle changes that you might not be ready for. In general, to lose weight, you need to either eat less or exercise more. For many people this means:

- eating 500 less calories per day, or
- exercising enough to use up an extra 500 calories per day.

You can talk to your doctor more about safe ways for you to lose weight.

6 How do I eat healthy on a budget?

A lot of people think they can't afford healthy food. It is possible to eat healthy on a budget. Finding simple meals with a protein source and some vegetables can be an easy, quick, and cheap meal.

Quick tips to save money:

- Use coupons and check for sales. Buy in bulk when possible.
- Protein - Meat is an expensive protein source. Decreasing your meat intake and using cheaper protein can help save you money. Eggs, beans, tofu are good sources of protein that tend to cost less.

- Produce - Buy what you know you'll eat. If you are buying fresh fruits and vegetables only get enough for what you know you will eat in the next couple of days. If you buy a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables they may go bad before you get a chance to eat them. This means wasted money. Buying only a few fresh items at once may mean more trips to the store, but it can also save you money.
- Frozen produce - If you do not think you will eat fresh produce before it goes bad, frozen vegetables and fruit are a good option. They are just as good nutritionally and will keep longer in the freezer. Many frozen vegetables are also pre-cut, which can save you time and steps while cooking.
- Many packaged snacks and prepared dinners are actually more expensive than making your own meal. If possible, learn how to make basic meals and make larger batches that can last for several meals. Cooking your fresh vegetables can often make them last longer.

These resources give some ideas for how to eat healthy even when money is tight. Not all of these ideas may be useful to you. You can ignore any that aren't.

The United States Department of Agriculture has a section of its web site that includes [articles on shopping on a budget](#). [Foodstamped.com](#) offers some recipes and tips on how to eat healthy on a food stamp budget.

Zenhabits.net has an article called [50 Tips for Grocery Shopping](#) that has a lot of tips for saving money at the grocery store, as well as for having a more calm experience at the grocery store.

7 Tips for Using the Grocery Store

The grocery store can be an extremely stressful experience for some people. Some tips that may be helpful are:

- Plan the shopping before you go, both by making a list and by making a plan of how you will navigate through the store.
- Get very familiar with just one neighborhood grocery store. A smaller one may be easier to get to know well. (But pick a store that is large enough to have the things you need.)
- Bring a friend with you.
- Develop a routine around grocery shopping: for example, visit the same aisles in the same order, use the same checkout - anything that can help reduce the need to process all the bustle of the store.
- Learn where the aisles are that you never use and then just ignore them (for example, there is no need to pay attention to the meat counter if you're a vegetarian).
- Stick to the perimeter of the store. Most grocery stores put the healthier items on the perimeter, like the produce and meat counter, or the frozen aisles. Most of the packaged and snack items are in the center of the store.
- Go grocery shopping during less crowded days and times, for example at 1:00 PM on a Tuesday, or, if you're a night person and have a 24-hour grocery, at 2:00 AM. The *busiest* times at the grocery store are usually:
 - Friday, Saturday, and Sunday mid-morning to late afternoon
 - Weekdays 4:00 PM to 6:00 PM
 - Around major holidays or events like Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, and Super Bowl Sunday
- Some grocery stores may have online shopping or a delivery service.
- Protect your senses—it's OK to use things like sunglasses, hats, headphones, or ear plugs in the grocery store.
- If your grocery store has them, the self checkouts can be a good way to avoid having to interact with sales people.

- Remember that you can always leave the store at any time if it gets overwhelming.

Shopping Tours Some grocery stores like New Seasons and Whole Foods, and some dieticians offer "tours" of grocery stores to help you select healthy foods or find foods to follow a particular diet (like if you need help finding gluten-free foods if you were diagnosed with Celiac disease or gluten-sensitivity). They can also help you find lower cost items to help save you money. Contact your local stores to see if they offer this service, or contact local dieticians, nutritionists, college health programs, and local health departments and ask.

About.com has a nice article on [how to shop](#) for groceries and how to navigate a grocery store.

Food Issues for Independent Autistic Adults is a website created by Patricia E. Clark that includes tips to [help with shopping](#).

8 Cooking is hard for me, what are some ideas to make it easier?

There are a lot of cooking resources on the Internet. These three are particularly clear with a lot of steps and photographs, and no confusing phrases like "until it looks good to you." [Step-by-Step Cook](#) offers in-depth, detailed, start-to-finish instructions on a wide variety of recipes. This site assumes that the users have no prior cooking experience, and includes photos of what each step should look like. [Cooking for Engineers](#) breaks recipes down very concretely with tables showing which steps are done in order and which are done at the same time. It also has information on cooking gadgets. [Cooking With Autism](#) has some step-by-step sample recipes, and offers a book for purchase. If following recipes or cooking a lot of different things just isn't going to happen for you, here are some ideas:

- Learn how to cook one kind of thing and then do variations on it. For example, learn how to use a rice cooker to make rice and steamed veg-

etables. Then you can just change the kind of vegetables you steam in it.

- Find healthy frozen dinners or other prepared foods that can be heated in a microwave.
- Learn what kinds of raw foods or pre-cooked foods will give you a healthy diet and then just make plates of them. For example, raw vegetables, canned beans, canned fish, fruits, bread, nuts, and cheese are all things that can be eaten without needing to touch a stove or put ingredients together.
- Make one day a week be "cooking day" and make all of your meals for the week on that day. Reheat them in the microwave or oven, or eat them cold the other six days.
- Trade with someone for cooking. If there's something you're good at but someone else finds hard, maybe you can trade with them. For example if you like programming computers, maybe you could build a web site for someone and keep it updated, and in return they could cook for you a few days a week.
- Keep some "emergency food" stocked so you don't go hungry on days when preparing food isn't manageable. For example, nuts and dried fruits are nutritious, high in calories, and can last a long time.

Food Issues for Independent Autistic Adults is a website created by Patricia E. Clark that includes tips to [help with cooking](#).

9 How do I cook safely?

The U.S. Fire Administration has tips on cooking and [fire safety](#).

Keepingitkleen.com has a lot of information about sanitation and [food safety](#). If you have trouble with forgetting that things are cooking, some kitchen devices run on automatic timers and will shut off by themselves. Examples are microwaves, some toaster ovens, some rice cookers or steamers. If you have trouble with cutting things up, you can get food pre-cut up in a few different ways.

- Some supermarkets carry pre-cut produce, usually in a cooler by the un-cut produce.
- Some supermarket workers at meat or fish counters or in delis will cut up your meat, fish, bread, or deli items for you if you ask them to, including removing skin and bones.
- Frozen or canned produce often comes pre-cut.
- Special cooking tools can sometimes help with cutting. Some tools help by making cutting safer and easier (like a bagel slicer). Other tools help by doing the cutting for you (like a food processor).

10 Someone else makes my food, how can I make sure it's healthy?

If you have a good relationship with the person who makes your food and you feel comfortable communicating with him or her, discuss your wish to eat a healthier diet. You can then brainstorm realistic ways that you can eat healthier foods. If you don't feel comfortable talking with your caregiver about wanting healthier food, you might ask for help from someone you trust. If you receive disability services, you can bring up your desire to eat healthier food at your person-centered care conference. You may want to talk to someone you trust first and invite him or her to the meeting so that he or she can help advocate for you.

11 I don't like or can't eat most food, what should I do?

Some people on the spectrum have trouble eating a variety of foods. Sometimes it is because of sensory reasons, for example trouble tolerating certain tastes, smells, temperatures, or textures. Other times it may be due to the desire for sameness and not liking changes in routines.

Although it is good to eat a variety of foods, the number of different types of foods is less important than making sure you have a balanced diet with all the nutrients you need. You can find detailed information about the nutritional value of different foods at [NutritionData.com](https://www.nutritiondata.com).

Some tips for getting the nutrients you need, even if you have a restricted diet, include:

- Look for foods you can tolerate that have each of the important nutrients.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about what vitamins or supplements you should take daily.
- Try a different form of the food - for example, some people who can't tolerate the texture of a vegetable may be able to drink it as a juice or smoothie.
- Prepare the food in a different way. Some people may not like raw broccoli, but they may like steamed or boiled broccoli.
- Change the temperature of a food and see if it works better for you that way.
- "Hide" foods - for example, you can put vegetables in a blender and then mix them into pasta or pizza sauce.
- Try something new on a day when you think you can handle it. Even if you don't like it at first, make sure to try it at least three different days before you reject it—you might find you like it after you have had it a few times.

- Try new foods when you're really hungry.
- Try adding spices you like to food.

Food Issues for Independent Autistic Adults is a website created by Patricia E. Clark that discusses some of the dietary issues adults on the autistic spectrum face including tips on coping with [food phobias](#).

12 Special Diets for People with Health Conditions

People with some types of health problems need special diets. For example, you may need to eat a special diet if you have diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, or Celiac disease, or if you take medications such as Coumadin. Your healthcare provider can give you information about what types of foods you should or should not eat to help take care of your health problems. In some cases, your healthcare provider can give you a referral to a nutritionist so that you can get more detailed counseling. Ask your provider if your health insurance would pay for a visit with a nutritionist.

13 Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are very common, both in general and among people on the autism spectrum. The National Eating Disorders Association is a good place to start for information about [eating disorders](#).

14 Links

General Nutrition

- The US government's fitness site has information and recommendations about [healthy eating](#).
- [Livestrong](#) is a health resource website. The nutrition section of this website has a comprehensive list of suggestions, advice, activities, and tools.
- [Mayoclinic.com](#) maintains useful and up-to-date information and tools to help people stay healthy. Their nutrition section has articles, tools, recipes, shopping tips, and other resources related to healthy eating.
- Some general information about what's in food can be found at [nutrition.com](#).
- [Food Issues for Independent Autistic Adults](#) by Patricia E. Clark addresses a variety of topics.
- [The American Heart Association](#) has nutrition and diet information that focuses on heart health.
- MedlinePlus has a section on [nutrition](#).

Food Safety

- [Fire safety](#)
- [Food safety](#)

Shopping

- [How to grocery shop](#)
- [Meal planning and budgeting](#)
- [Shopping on a food stamp budget](#)
- [50 tips for Grocery Shopping](#)

Cooking

- [Step-by-Step Cook](#)
- [Cooking for Engineers](#)
- [Cooking with Autism](#)

See the National Eating Disorders Association for information on [eating disorders](#).