

Q&A: Components of a healthy diet and clean eating

April 1 2021, by From Mayo Clinic News Network



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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I gained a bit of weight during quarantine. And as spring approaches, I want to focus on losing the excess pounds. I enjoy exercise, but I struggle with snacking and eating more processed

foods than I should. A friend suggested clean eating. Do you have any advice so I can focus on clean eating and making more healthful choices to get my nutrition back on track?

ANSWER: Congratulations on being proactive to put your health and weight on track. Whether you are trying to lose weight or not, it is generally important to engage in [clean eating](#). Although there are many variations to clean eating, it basically refers to eating foods that are as close as possible to their natural state.

One of the main reasons to eat clean are the health benefits of consuming foods rich in nutrient content that have not been overly processed. Clean eating nourishes you with healthy nutrient-dense foods, filling your body with vitamins, minerals, high-quality protein and [healthy fats](#), all of which improve heart and brain health, assist in weight management, build a stronger immune system, and increase energy levels.

It may feel overwhelming to change your diet, but my advice to you would be to consider different categories of food and then make small pivots based on what you like, what you are comfortable cooking and what may be in season.

Consider, for instance, the following foods:

- Fresh fruit—Apples, bananas, blueberries, grapes, oranges, strawberries or 100% fruit juice
- Vegetables—Avocados, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, corn, green beans, mushrooms, lettuce, peppers, [sweet potatoes](#) or tomatoes
- Lean meats/proteins—Dried beans, eggs from grass-fed chickens, fresh fish, plain nut butters (no sugars added) or unflavored nuts

- Grain (cereal) foods—Those made with [whole grains](#), air-popped popcorn, oats, brown rice or whole-wheat pasta
- Dairy products—Cheese, milk, plain yogurt or unsweetened nondairy products

So, for breakfast, consider a whole-grain avocado toast, drizzled with olive oil and maybe some spices. And grab a banana, too. A glass of low-fat milk or a side of yogurt can give you great protein and a calcium boost.

As for snacking, it's still important to reach for clean foods that will fuel your body with good nutrients. Consider how often you reach for snacks during the day. If you know you're snacking often, plan out and prepackage snacks.

If you portion out healthy snacks and place them somewhere you will see them, it will be harder to overindulge. It can be very difficult to estimate appropriate portion sizes, which can lead to unwanted weight gain. Using these visual cues will help you get close to the actual recommended serving sizes:

- Fruit—One serving is equivalent to a tennis ball. 1 medium whole fruit
- 1/2 cup of chopped, cooked or canned fruit
- Vegetables—One serving is equivalent to one or two baseballs. 2 cups of raw, leafy vegetables (two baseballs)
- 1 cup of chopped, cooked or canned raw veggies (1 baseball)
- Grains—One serving is equivalent to a hockey puck. 1 slice whole-wheat bread
- 1/2 cup of cooked pasta, potatoes or rice
- Protein foods—One serving is equivalent to a hockey puck. 3 ounces of cooked meat
- Fat—One serving is equivalent to one die. 1 teaspoon butter,

margarine or oil

Another helpful tip is to track your progress and choices. This can help to motivate you to keep going. Jot down daily the number of meals and snacks. Consider a menu or checklist of options. Track what you have selected, and then, at the end of the week, go ahead and indulge in a piece of chocolate or small scoop of frozen yogurt.

Be mindful also of when you snack. It's very easy to turn to [food](#) when you are feeling stressed or bored, but this can lead to overeating, which can further increase stress levels with weight gain that may result.

If you are someone who craves sweets—which is a normal response to stress—reach for lean protein foods, such as hard-boiled eggs, tuna, cheese sticks, plain no-sugar-added yogurt or soups made with lots of vegetables.

Before you grab a snack, always ask yourself, "Am I physically hungry or am I just stressed?" You also can distract yourself with walks or something creative.

As you start this journey, remember that weight loss and diet changes take time. If you are going to weigh yourself, do so at the same time every day. Remember that to maintain your weight, you should be eating 10 calories per pound per day. For you, seeing your goal is to lose [weight](#), you will want to consume fewer calories than your body is using or burning. I would consider finding an app you like to help you track eating and exercise, as well as calories, to help keep you motivated.

Be patient with yourself, research has shown it can take up to 66 days of consistently repeating a behavior until it forms a habit. Work toward progress, not perfection. Engage in clean eating, healthy portion sizes and mindful snacking to maintain healthy lifestyle behaviors.

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Citation: Q&A: Components of a healthy diet and clean eating (2021, April 1) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-04-qa-components-healthy-diet.html>

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