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Building the Perfect Plate: What Your Body Really Needs



Knowing what is “right” and “wrong” when it comes to nutrition is an endeavor that fascinates and confounds many of us. An ever-evolving field, learning how to eat healthily can be as confusing and frustrating as anything else.

Thankfully, many tools have been built to help make eating healthy. One such tool is called MyPlate from the USDA.

This tool breaks down exactly how we should be building our plates to keep our food groups in balance and get enough of the nutritional value we need from our foods. Let’s break it down!

Grains: $\frac{1}{4}$ of your plate

Grains are derived from wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, barley, or other cereal grains. Examples include bread, pasta, breakfast cereals, grits, tortillas, popcorn, rice, and oatmeal. It is advisable to prioritize whole grains in the diet, as these contain the entire grain kernel, unlike refined grains, which are milled and have portions of the kernel removed. Refined grains are digested more rapidly, frequently resulting in a swift rise and subsequent drop in blood glucose levels, which may increase feelings of hunger. In contrast, whole grains provide additional fiber, protein, and nutrients, promoting slower digestion, improved satiety, and steadier nutrient absorption.

Protein: $\frac{1}{4}$ of your plate

The protein group features seafood, meat, poultry, eggs, nuts, seeds, soy products, beans, peas, and lentils—some of which also count as vegetables. Choose lean or low-fat meats to limit saturated fat and aim to vary your protein sources for balanced nutrition. Vegetarians and vegans can meet their protein needs with plant-based options such as eggs, nuts, seeds, and legumes by including them in every meal and snack.



Fruits & Vegetables: ½ of your plate

Fruits and vegetables should make up at least half your plate, whether fresh, frozen, canned, dried, raw, or cooked. Their colors reflect their nutrient content—orange/yellow varieties like sweet potatoes and carrots are rich in Vitamin A, while red ones such as tomatoes and strawberries contain lycopene. Choose options without added sugar, sauces, or salt. Eating produce in season is typically cheaper and tastier.



Dairy: A glass (or one serving) on the side

The dairy group should not be forgotten! The dairy group consists of foods such as milk, yogurt, cheese, lactose-free milk, and fortified soy milk. This group does not include foods made from milk that contain little calcium and are high in fat, including cream cheese, sour cream, cream, and butter. Dairy foods supply calcium and other vitamins and minerals. Individuals following a vegan diet can obtain these nutrients from plant-based sources with appropriate planning. Plant-based calcium-fortified foods like soy milk, tofu, or juices can serve as alternative sources.

No Perfect Diet—Just Meaningful Progress



While the title of this article may suggest otherwise, it's important to acknowledge that there is no single "right" or "perfect" answer when it comes to nutrition. Each person has unique dietary needs, preferences, and circumstances—meaning that finding what works best requires personal effort and exploration. A healthy eating plan for one individual may look very different from someone else's, and that's perfectly okay.

It's also worth remembering that improving your nutrition is a gradual process. Expecting to overhaul everything overnight isn't realistic. Instead, celebrate small, meaningful steps—like adding more whole grains or incorporating extra fruits and vegetables into your meals. Progress doesn't have to be perfect to be powerful.

Resources

[MyPlate.gov](https://www.myplate.gov) | [U.S. Department of Agriculture](https://www.usda.gov)

[Phytonutrients: Paint your plate with the colors of the rainbow - Harvard Health](https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthy-diet/phytonutrients)