

A Balanced Diet

What is a Balanced Diet and Why is it Important?

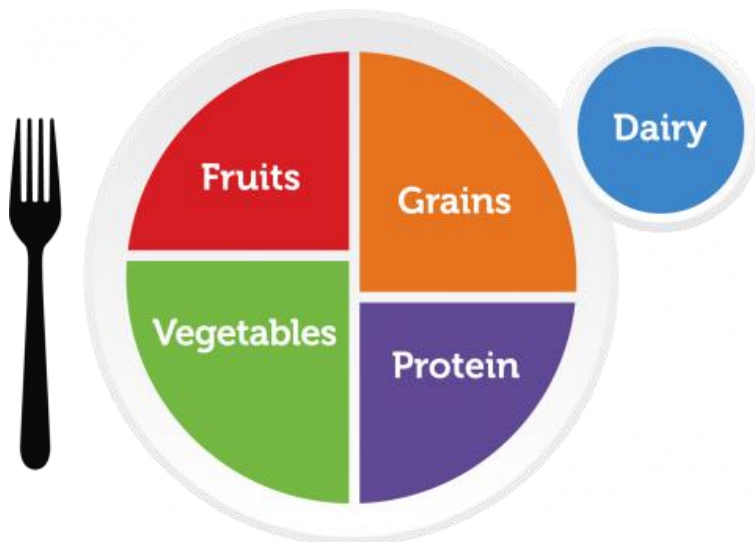
A balanced diet is a diet that contains all food groups in the proper amounts. The food groups we need every day are: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy. More simply these can be broken down into carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. A balanced diet is important because it ensures that we consume all the necessary nutrients to keep our bodies healthy and strong.

It is important to note that people with dietary restrictions and those following plant-based diets can still achieve a balanced diet with all of the components listed above. There are many different sources of plant-based proteins, and the nutrients from dairy can be found in some fortified foods. If you are on a plant-based diet and are struggling to implement a balanced diet, [Pick Up Limes](#) is a blog by a Registered Dietitian that shows a MyPlate diagram for each recipe to guide you.

MyPlate and Dietary Recommendations

The best guide for what a balanced diet should look like is MyPlate. MyPlate was designed by the United States Department of Agriculture and is based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.¹

As shown in the diagram below, MyPlate recommends half of your plate be produce (fruits and vegetables), a quarter of your plate be protein, and another quarter is whole grains. Dairy is an important component of the diet and is shown as a cup on the side of the plate. Dairy is milk, cheese, and yogurt, and can be added to the main meal. It does not have to be a side dish.



The Dietary Guidelines for Americans have four main recommendations²:

1. Follow a healthy dietary pattern at every life stage.²
2. Customize and enjoy nutrient-dense food and beverage choices to reflect personal preferences, cultural traditions, and budgetary considerations.²
3. Focus on meeting food group needs with nutrient-dense foods and beverages, and stay within calorie limits.²
4. Limit foods and beverages higher in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium, and limit alcoholic beverages.²

What these recommendations are saying is to eat a variety of foods (as shown in MyPlate) according to your cultural practices, and limit foods that are less nutrient dense like those high in sugar.

Tips for Creating a Balanced Meal

Sometimes it can be difficult to recreate MyPlate when we are cooking our own meals at home, and especially when we eat out. Here are some tips:

- Imagine all the components of MyPlate when planning your meals. For example, when planning a dinner, think of a protein, grain, and vegetable.
- Print out a picture of MyPlate and hang it in your kitchen so you can easily see it while preparing meals.
- If you are having trouble starting out, try having at least one fruit or vegetable with each meal. Your fruits and vegetables do not have to be fresh. Canned and frozen fruits and vegetables are just as healthy and nutrient dense as their fresh counterparts.

Some meals won't look like the picture above due to how the meal is prepared, and that's ok! Just think that you need half the meal to be produce, a quarter to be protein, and a quarter to be grains, with some dairy. If this doesn't work for your meal, try to make your day as a whole look like this. If you are short on meal ideas, myplate.gov has an index of recipes that may be helpful. Just remember, your plate doesn't have to be perfect!

MyPlate Balanced Meal Ideas

Breakfast:

- Breakfast burritos with a whole wheat tortilla, eggs, and sautéed bell peppers
- Greek yogurt, granola, and berries
- Whole wheat avocado toast with an egg on top

Lunch/Dinner:

- Salad, steamed fish with a lemon cream sauce, and brown rice
- Burritos with beans, lettuce, tomatoes, and a whole wheat tortilla
- Whole wheat pasta with sautéed chicken and mixed vegetables

Resources

1. *What is MyPlate?* MyPlate. (n.d.). Retrieved October 6, 2022, from <https://www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/what-is-myplate>
2. *Current dietary guidelines*. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 and Online Materials | Dietary Guidelines for Americans. (n.d.). Retrieved October 6, 2022, from <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/resources/2020-2025-dietary-guidelines-online-materials>