

## EATING FOR HEALTH BY KIM WIEMHOLT, RN

What exactly, is the goal of healthy eating, you might ask? According to the United States Department of Agriculture ( USDA )<sup>1</sup> eating **nutrient-dense** or **nutrient-packed** foods that help you to get the nutrients your body needs for growth, development, and overall health, while maintaining a healthy weight and meeting your energy needs is the foundation of a healthy diet. Many Americans do not consume enough foods that contain essential nutrients such as calcium, potassium, fiber, magnesium, and Vitamins A, C, and E. We also eat too many foods that are high in calories, saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, added sugar and salt.

Where do I start when I 'm thinking about losing weight and eating healthy? The best place to start is to have a realistic view of how many calories you typically consume during an average day. Many of us tend to generally consume the same amount of food daily. However, we may not have a realistic view of the total amount of fat and calories that we are actually consuming. A food diary is the best place to start. Write down the foods and amounts that you eat each meal for a week. There are websites that can assist you in counting the calories in the foods that you have eaten. Do a simple Google search for a free calorie counter. Some examples I found were the Free Calorie Calculator at [www.FitClick.com](http://www.FitClick.com) and at [www.myfitnesspal.com](http://www.myfitnesspal.com).

Websites such as [mypyramid.gov](http://mypyramid.gov)<sup>2</sup> can help you to calculate how many calories you should be consuming to maintain or to gradually lose weight at a healthy rate. (Remember to consult your physician before beginning any diet or exercise plan. ) [Mypyramid.gov](http://Mypyramid.gov) will take you step by step through the food guide pyramid and explain each of the major food groups. Each of the food groups provides a variety of nutrients. Whichever diet plan you choose, it is important to make sure that it incorporates these components of a healthy eating plan:

- Emphasize fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk

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products

- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans (legumes), eggs, and nuts
- Is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars
- Balances calorie intake with calorie needs

**Learn to read food labels.** [MyPyramid.gov](http://MyPyramid.gov) has an interactive program that will help teach you to read food labels. By checking servings and calories, you will find out how much you are actually eating. If there are 2 servings in a can of soup that contains 100 calories per serving, and you have eaten the whole can, then you have consumed 200 calories. Also check the percentage of Daily Value (DV) of the nutrients in the food. If it contains 5% or less of the DV for any nutrient, it is low—20% DV or more is high. The USDA recommends:

- Try to get 100% DV per day of dietary fiber, Vitamins A and C, calcium, potassium and iron.
- Try to stay below 100% DV per day for total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium
- Try to keep trans fats as low as possible.

We have discussed the value in eating **nutrient-dense** foods. Now we want to turn around and look at the Center for Disease Controls' (CDC) recommendations for eating **low-energy-dense** foods and weight management. So, what is energy density? According to CDC's [Research to Practice Series, No.5 Low-Energy-Dense Foods and Weight Management: Cutting Calories While Controlling Hunger](#)<sup>3</sup>, “**energy density** is the amount of calories in a particular weight of food

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**lower** energy density provide fewer calories per gram than foods with a higher **energy** density. For the same amount of calories, a person can consume a larger portion of a food **lower** in **energy-density** than a food **higher** in **energy-density**. This can help a person to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight. In order to reverse the trend in America towards overweight and obesity, CDC recommends that we consume fewer calories and be more active.

Energy-density in a food is affected by its composition. Water, for example, lowers the energy-density of foods because it has an energy density of 0 kcal/g and contributes weight but not energy (calories) to the food. Fiber content is another example that helps to lower the energy density of a food.

Fat, on the other hand, coming in at 9 kcal/g, is the most energy dense component of food. It provides more than twice as many calories per gram than carbohydrates or protein which have only 4 kcal/g.

Fruits, vegetables, and broth-based soups are foods that have either a high water or fiber content and a little fat. If you have a high-fat food (high energy-density), increasing the water content will actually lower the energy-density. For example if you add water-rich vegetables, such as spinach, zucchini, celery, and carrots, to mixed dishes such as chili and casseroles it will lower the energy density of these dishes.

The biggest benefit of eating a **low-energy-dense** diet is that it helps people to control their hunger and experience feelings of satiety (fullness) and satisfaction at the end of their meal, even when they are lowering their calorie intake. Eating a low-energy-dense salad or a low-energy-dense soup as a first course to a meal can actually help you to consume fewer calories during your meal. This may be the key in helping people to make healthy eating a way of life.

## RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Agriculture, [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov), Health Facts

<sup>2</sup>U. S. Department of Agriculture, [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)

<sup>3</sup>Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), Health Topics, Nutrition, For Health Professionals, Research to Practice Series.