

Talk to Your Patients and Clients About Healthy Eating Routines



As a health professional, you know it's important to help your patients make healthier food choices. After all, nutrition is one of the best tools we have to prevent chronic diseases. But it can be challenging to motivate patients in the short time you spend together.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025 offers evidence-based nutrition guidance that can make your job easier — including guidance by life stage from birth to older adulthood.

Share the recommendations with your patients and help them build a healthy eating routine.

Start the conversation

When you bring up healthy eating with your patients, keep the tone positive and encouraging. Try these friendly conversation starters:



What does a typical dinnertime look like for your family?

Meet people where they are — ask about favorite meals and find out if they eat together or separately. Then suggest small, healthy changes tailored to their situation.



Who does the grocery shopping and cooking in your home?

Find out what they're buying and how often they cook. Explain how to use the Nutrition Facts label to make healthier choices and encourage them to cook more at home.



When you're thirsty, what kind of drink do you reach for?

Over a third of the added sugars in the American diet come from sweetened drinks, like soda. Try to steer your patients toward healthier options, like water.

Recommend a mix of healthy foods

Encourage your patients to **fill half their plate with fruits and veggies** – and to choose a variety of foods they enjoy in each food group:



Whole fruits – like apples, berries, grapefruit, papaya, and bananas



Veggies – like broccoli, sweet potatoes, beets, okra, spinach, peppers, and jicama



Whole grains – like brown rice, millet, oatmeal, bulgur, and whole-wheat bread



Proteins – like lean meats and chicken, eggs, seafood, beans and lentils, nuts and seeds, and tofu



Low-fat or fat-free dairy – like milk, yogurt, cheese, lactose-free dairy, and fortified soy beverages (soy milk) or soy yogurt



Oils – like vegetable oil, olive oil, and oils in foods like seafood, avocado, and nuts



Find more examples of healthy foods at [DietaryGuidelines.gov/DGA_2020-2025_Customizing.pdf](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/DGA_2020-2025_Customizing.pdf) [PDF – 1.1 MB].



Help them set healthy limits

As part of healthy eating routine, it's important to cut down on added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. Help your patients stay within healthy limits by sharing these key points:



Added sugars make it hard to get all the nutrients you need without also getting too many calories. The Dietary Guidelines recommends getting less than 10% of calories from added sugars – that's about 50 grams a day for a 2,000-calorie diet. And children under age 2 shouldn't have any added sugars at all.



Too much **saturated fat** can raise your risk of heart disease. For everyone ages 2 and older, the Dietary Guidelines recommends getting less than 10% of calories from saturated fat – that's about 20 grams a day for a 2,000-calorie diet.



Too much **sodium** can raise your risk of high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke. Adults and kids ages 14 and older need to limit sodium to no more than 2,300 milligrams a day – and younger kids need even less.



Encourage your patients to use the Nutrition Facts label to choose healthier foods – and to cook more at home using ingredients lower in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium.



What about alcohol?

If your patients drink alcohol, tell them that **drinking less is better** for their health than drinking more. Encourage patients not to drink or to drink in moderation – 1 drink or less in a day for women and 2 drinks or less in a day for men.

And remember that some of your patients shouldn't drink at all, like people who are pregnant or have certain health conditions.

Make healthy eating feel doable

Changing behavior can feel overwhelming at first. But healthy eating really pays off! Remind your patients that making healthy food choices now can help prevent diseases and keep them healthy in the future. Then share these messages to set them up for success:

- **Small changes add up.** Healthy eating isn't all or nothing, and it doesn't have to mean major changes. The key is to make every bite count with small changes and healthy shifts.
- **Healthy eating can work for everyone.** Everyone can build a healthy eating routine that fits their family's tastes, traditions, culture, and budget.
- **It's never too late (or too early!) to start.** Healthy eating is key at every stage of life — no matter your age, it's always a good time to make a change. And when parents model healthy habits, it sets their kids up for a lifetime of healthy eating.



Offer your support

Healthy eating can be a sensitive subject, so use these tips to make patients feel supported:

- **Tell them you're on their side.** When it comes to nutrition guidance, lecturing and criticizing patients can really backfire. So make it feel like a team effort! Say you want to work together to find a healthy eating plan that works for them
- **Celebrate success.** When patients make a healthy change, cheer them on! If you notice positive changes in their health — like a healthier weight or lower blood pressure — link these benefits to their healthier food choices.
- **Be empathetic.** Changing behavior is hard — especially when it comes to food. The important thing is to encourage your patients to keep trying. Listen to their concerns and talk about ways to overcome barriers to healthy eating.

Be ready to address barriers

Eating healthy can be challenging for many people. Share these tips to help your patients overcome common barriers:



- **“I can’t afford healthy foods.”**

Offer budget-friendly shopping tips — like buying frozen or canned fruits and veggies instead of fresh — and help them find more tips at [MyPlate.gov/Eat-Healthy/Healthy-Eating-Budget](https://www.MyPlate.gov/Eat-Healthy/Healthy-Eating-Budget). And if they can’t afford enough food for their family, connect them with programs that can help at [USA.gov/Food-Help](https://www.USA.gov/Food-Help).

- **“I don’t have time to cook healthy meals.”**

Suggest cooking a healthy dinner just once a week — that’s a great first step. Or they can try cooking meals in batches on the weekend to heat up for dinners during the week.

- **“Healthy foods just aren’t convenient.”**

Offer tips to make it easier to choose healthy foods. They can try keeping cut-up fruits and veggies on hand in the fridge for easy snacking. Or suggest healthier takeout and fast-food options, like a grilled chicken sandwich instead of fried.

- **“My kids won’t eat anything healthy.”**

Let them know this is a common challenge! Tell them it can take up to 10 tries for kids to get used to a new food. Suggest getting kids involved in shopping and cooking. That way, kids can choose some healthy foods they’re willing to try.

- **“Experts keep changing their minds about what’s healthy.”**

Explain that the Dietary Guidelines aren’t a fad diet — they’re a basic framework for healthy eating that stays largely consistent year after year. People can trust the Dietary Guidelines because it’s based on the best nutrition evidence we have.

Find resources for your patients

This fact sheet is just for professionals, but there are lots of materials you can share with your patients:

- Learn about the Dietary Guidelines for Americans — including specific guidance for different life stages — and find fact sheets and other resources to share at [DietaryGuidelines.gov](https://www.DietaryGuidelines.gov).
- Refer your patients to [MyPlate.gov](https://www.MyPlate.gov), where they can find more practical advice, recipes, and healthy eating tips.

