

# Nutrition for Mental Health: Information for Adults



Image credit: Adobe Stock

**Summary:** Eating healthy is one of the best things that you can do for your physical and mental health. Research shows that healthy eating is important in preventing and treating many health conditions.

## Jane's Story, Part 1

Jane is a 25-year-old college student. Her life is busy. She buses to school, so breakfast is usually just a cup of coffee. Lunch is often just a muffin. Because she's hungry, she often buys snacks from a vending machine. She knows that she's sleep deprived because she doesn't feel rested when her alarm wakes her up in the morning. Jane has been feeling stressed, anxious and tired. She reluctantly sees her family doctor, who recommends that Jane start with some changes to her food intake.

## Introduction

The bad news: Our modern, hectic lifestyle, being surrounded by unhealthy foods and other factors can make it hard to eat healthy meals.

The good news? There are ways to eat healthy using familiar foods that you can find at your local grocery store.

Healthy eating includes:

- Eating a wide variety of foods to give your body the nutrition it needs (energy, proteins, carbohydrates, fats, fibre, vitamins, minerals and water);
- Having three meals a day plus snacks in between if you're hungry;
- Preparing and sharing meals with friends and family;
- Eating in a mindful way. This means sitting down at a table, relaxing and eating slowly while enjoying the taste of the food. This helps us to feel our body's hunger and fullness signals.

Advantages of healthy foods:

- Can save you money. Foods that contribute to good health (like whole grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables) may require some preparation but can cost less than highly processed, pre-packaged and fast foods.
- Will make your brain and body feel better. The cost of this? Priceless.

## Mental Health and Nutrition

---

Studies confirm that it is important to eat healthy for mental (and physical health). People with good mental health tend to:

- Eating more healthy foods such as:
  - Fresh fruit and vegetables
  - Whole grain cereals, nuts, beans, lentils
- Eating less unhealthy foods such as
  - High sugar foods
  - Processed foods such as such as
    - (Store-bought) granola bars (due to high sugar);
    - Instant noodles (due to high salt);
    - (Store-bought) dried fruits (which have added sugar);
    - Flavored nuts (due to added salt);
    - Fruit snacks (due to corn syrup);
    - Margarine;
    - Frozen foods
  - Fast foods and junk foods (which tend to be both high sugar and highly processed)

## Limit Food Additives and Plastics When Possible

---

Studies show that various food additives, along with plastics, may be contributing to health problems (such as obesity), and that children may be particularly sensitive. The American Paediatric Society recommends (Trasande, 2018):

Do the following...

- Eat fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables when possible, and support that effort by developing a list of low-cost sources for fresh fruits and vegetables
- Use alternatives to plastic, such as glass or stainless steel, when possible.
- Wash your hands before handling foods and/or drinks, and wash all fruits and vegetables that cannot be peeled.

Do try to avoid the following...

- Avoid processed meats, especially maternal consumption during pregnancy.
- Avoid microwaving food or beverages (including infant formula and pumped human milk) in plastic, if possible.
- Avoid placing plastics in the dishwasher.
- Avoid plastics with recycling codes 3 (phthalates), 6 (styrene), and 7 (bisphenols) unless plastics are labeled as “biobased” or “greenware,” indicating that they are made from corn and do not contain bisphenols. To figure out the recycling code, you can look at the bottom of plastic products to find it.

## “I haven’t eaten regular meals in years! Where do I start?”

---

- Make changes gradually. Small steps will support long-term goals. If, like Jane, you start your days with a cup of coffee, begin by eating a simple breakfast of toast with peanut butter twice a week.

## Looking for Ways to Eat Healthy?

---

Here are some suggestions adapted from three food guides: the Mediterranean Food Guide, the Canada Food Guide and the Omega-3 Fats Guide.

Whole grains at each meal	Brown rice, barley, oats, quinoa Products made with whole grain flour (whole wheat and rye) such as breads, pasta and cereals
Fruit with meals and/or snacks daily	All fresh and frozen fruits are nutritious
Vegetables at lunch and dinner	All fresh and frozen vegetables are nutritious Eat a variety of colours and types Eat at least one serving of raw vegetables daily
Milk products and milk substitutes, lower fat (0%, 1%, 2%)	Non-dairy milk substitutes (unsweetened and fortified, if possible): soy milk, nut milks (cashew, almond, coconut, etc.), hemp milk or vegan milks (e.g. made from pea protein)  Have two servings a day: ● 1 serving = 250 mL (1 cup) milk = 180 mL (¾ cup) yogurt or kefir = 40 g (a 4 cm x 3 cm x 2 cm cube) of lower fat cheese  If these products are not fortified with Vitamin D or if you eat fewer than 2 servings of milk/milk substitutes a day, a Vitamin D supplement of 600 IU (ages 1-70 years) is recommended.
Two to four eggs per week	Have omelettes, scrambled or boiled eggs Use in baking and cooking or add to salads and casseroles
Legumes at least twice a week	Beans (kidney, navy, etc.), peas (chick, black-eyed) and lentils – canned or dried
Choose lean white meat for at least two servings a week	Chicken, turkey or rabbit
Choose fish and seafood for at least two servings a week	A variety of fish (canned, fresh or frozen) such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, cod, anchovies, trout and tuna
Limit red meat to two servings a week	Red meat includes beef, pork, goat and lamb Replace red and processed meat products with lean white meat, tofu, legumes, eggs, fish or seafood
Limit processed meat products to one serving a week	Reduce hot dogs, sausages, deli meats, salami, bacon, etc.
Unsalted nuts and seeds every day – 30-60 mL (2-4 tbsp)	Nuts and seeds include walnuts, almonds, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, etc.
Use a variety of oils to cook and add flavour to foods	Canola, soybean and olive oil (extra virgin is the most flavourful) Use these oils in salad dressings or simply drizzle on raw or cooked vegetables Choose non-hydrogenated margarines made with canola or soybean oil
Plenty of fluids	Aim for 1.5-2 litres (6-8 cups) of fluids every day such as water, herbal teas (without sugar) Have a glass of water with meals, snacks and throughout the day Limit caffeinated beverages (coffee, green and black tea) to 500 mL (2 cups) a day
Flavouring your food	Use spices, herbs, garlic and onions instead of salt
Limit sweets	Reduce candies, pastries and desserts to two servings a week or less, or save them for special occasions Enjoy dark chocolate occasionally
Limit sweetened beverages	Reduce or eliminate soft drinks, sports drinks, sweetened fruit beverages and energy drinks

Limit salty, packaged snack foods

Reduce potato chips, nacho chips, etc.

## Sample Menus

Here are some sample menus that take less time to prepare and use familiar processed or convenience foods. You can make additions to complete the meal.

### Sample Menu – Day 1

Breakfast	Fresh fruit (if not enough time at breakfast, have at snack time) 1–2 slices whole wheat toast spread with a nut butter 180 mL ( $\frac{3}{4}$ cup) yogurt or 250 mL (1 cup) milk (dairy or non-dairy) Water
Snack	High-fibre nut and fruit cereal bar (bring from home) Water
Lunch	Purchased combo meal – 6" submarine/sandwich on a whole grain bun Oatmeal cookie Milk or water
Snack	Fresh fruit Water
Dinner	Option 1 2 pieces of store-bought frozen pizza (add grated cheese) – cook the whole pizza and save the rest for another meal Side salad or 125–250 mL ( $\frac{1}{2}$ –1 cup) cooked vegetables made from frozen or fresh Water  Option 2 Frozen beef or veggie burger patty topped with mozzarella cheese on a whole grain bun 125–250 mL ( $\frac{1}{2}$ –1 cup) cooked vegetables made from frozen or fresh 250 mL (1 cup) frozen yogurt with fruit on top, if desired Water or herbal tea
Evening snack, if hungry or desired	Fresh fruit Water or herbal tea

### Sample Menu – Day 2

Breakfast	Fresh fruit (if not enough time at breakfast, have at snack time) 250–375 mL (1–1½ cups) of whole grain cold cereal 30 mL (2 tbsp) nuts or seeds sprinkled on cereal 250 mL (1 cup) milk (dairy or non-dairy) Water
Snack	Fresh fruit Water

Lunch	<p>Option 1</p> <p>Purchased meal or leftover – 1 slice pizza</p> <p>Green salad</p> <p>Cookie</p> <p>Milk or water</p> <p>Option 2 (if at home)</p> <p>Half a package of boxed macaroni and cheese or canned pasta in a sauce – add 60 mL (¼ cup) grated cheese</p> <p>125–250 mL (½–1 cup) cooked or raw vegetables</p> <p>Cookie</p> <p>Milk or water</p>
Snack	<p>High-fibre nut and fruit cereal bar</p> <p>Water</p>
Dinner	<p>Frozen dinner meal</p> <p>125–250 mL (½–1 cup) cooked vegetables made from frozen or fresh</p> <p>1 slice whole grain bread or bun with margarine</p> <p>Ice cream sandwich</p> <p>Water</p>
Evening snack, if hungry or desired	<p>Fresh fruit</p> <p>Water or herbal tea</p>

Here are more ideas to try as you become more comfortable with planning and home preparation of meals. Modify the menus to suit your tastes.

#### Sample Menu – Day 3

Breakfast	<p>1 medium banana</p> <p>1–2 slices of whole wheat toast spread with margarine or a nut butter (peanut butter, etc.)</p> <p>180 mL (¾ cup) yogurt or 250 mL (1 cup) milk (dairy or non-dairy)</p> <p>Water</p>
Snack	<p>1 fruit</p> <p>Water</p>
Lunch	<p>1 sandwich wrap made with 1 large whole wheat tortilla; ½ can tuna or salmon mixed with olive oil mayonnaise; spinach leaves and tomato</p> <p>125–250 mL (½–1 cup) cut-up raw vegetables</p> <p>Water</p>
Snack	<p>30 mL (2 tbsp) nuts (walnuts or almonds) or seeds (sunflower)</p> <p>180 mL (¾ cup) yogurt</p> <p>Water</p>
Dinner	<p>250 mL (1 cup) of brown rice or whole grain couscous</p> <p>1 small or ½ large chicken breast sautéed in olive oil</p> <p>125–250 mL (½–1 cup) cooked vegetables made from frozen or fresh</p> <p>Side salad</p> <p>Water</p>
Evening snack, if hungry or desired	<p>250 mL (1 cup) frozen yogurt and oatmeal cookie</p> <p>Water or herbal tea</p>

#### Sample Menu – Day 4

Breakfast	1 serving of oatmeal made with milk 30 mL (2 tbsp) nuts or seeds sprinkled on oatmeal 250 mL (1 cup) berries or other fruit 180 mL (¾ cup) yogurt Water
Snack	1 fruit Water
Lunch	Mix together to be eaten cold or heated up: 250 mL (1 cup) brown rice, whole grain couscous or pasta, or quinoa 180 mL (¾ cup) cooked legumes (lentils, chickpeas, black or kidney beans) 125-250 mL (½-1 cup) cut-up raw vegetables  Drizzle salad dressing or simply oil (olive, canola or soybean) with herbs and pepper to taste 1 fruit Water
Snack	Cut-up raw vegetables 60 mL (¼ cup) hummus or other bean dip Water
Dinner	250 mL (1 cup) cooked whole grain spaghetti pasta Spaghetti sauce (homemade or store-bought) made with tofu, minced turkey, chicken or lean ground beef Grated cheese Green salad with dressing 180 mL (¾ cup) yogurt with fruit or berries Water
Evening snack, if hungry or desired	1 piece whole grain toast with nut butter Water or herbal tea

## Sample Menu – Day 5

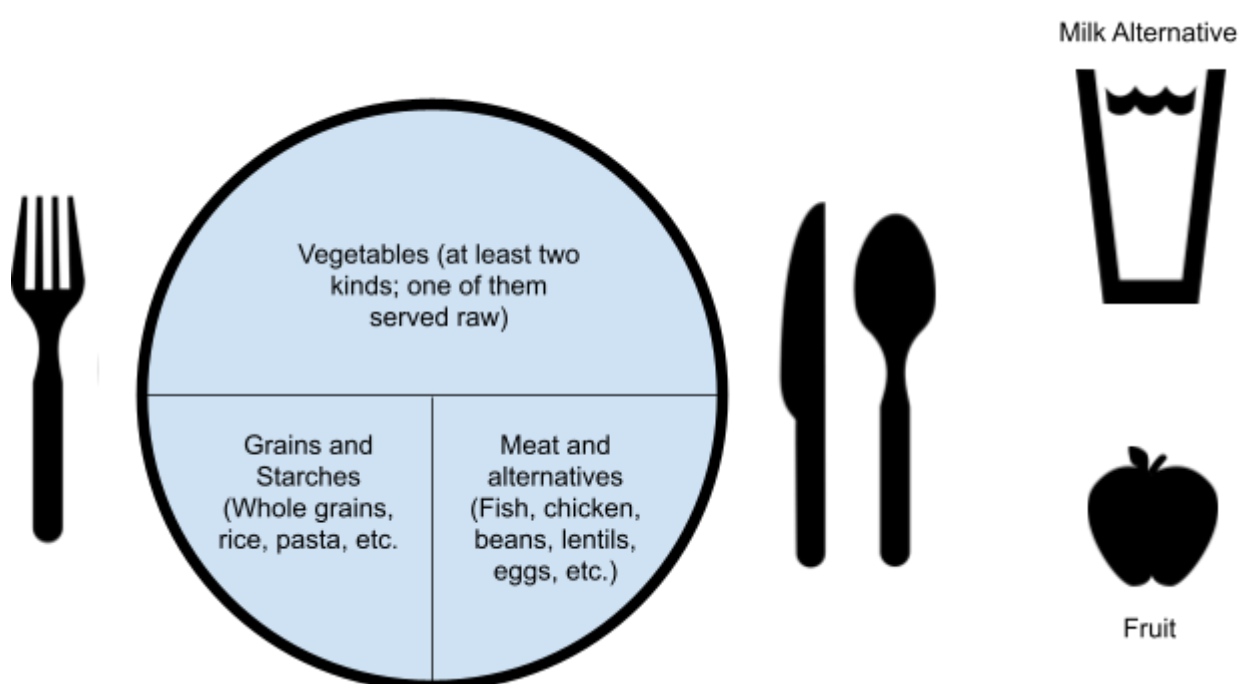
Breakfast	Smoothie – Mix the following in a blender: 125 mL (½ cup) yogurt 125 mL (½ cup) milk (dairy or non-dairy) 125 mL (½ cup) oat flakes 30 mL (2 tbsp) nuts, seeds or nut butter 125 mL (½ cup) fresh or frozen berries
Snack	1 fruit Water
Lunch	1 sandwich made with 2 slices whole wheat or rye bread; lean sliced turkey or chicken; olive oil mayonnaise, margarine or avocado; spinach or lettuce leaves 125-250 mL (½-1 cup) cut-up raw vegetables Fruit Water
Snack	High-fibre nut and fruit cereal bar, or if home, whole wheat crackers and cheese Water
Dinner	250 mL (1 cup) of sweet potatoes 1 serving of salmon baked in oven or sautéed in olive oil 125-250 mL (½-1 cup) cooked vegetables made from frozen or fresh Side salad 1 small whole grain roll with margarine Water
Evening snack, if hungry or desired	180 mL (¾ cup) pudding and a cookie Water or herbal tea

## Other Tips

- Daily physical activity. You can build up the amount of time you are physically active just 10 minutes at a time! Activities could be a walk, a bicycle ride, a dance class, yoga, etc. Exercise can improve your mood and your sense of well-being – and lower your feelings of stress.
- Good sleep hygiene. Getting enough healthy sleep is important for both physical and mental health.
- Reach out for motivation and encouragement from your friends, family and other supports.

## Sample Lunch/Dinner Plate

This sample lunch/dinner plate shows balanced portions:



## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q. What about a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement?

A. Eating a wide variety of foods as outlined in the guidelines is the best way to obtain the vitamins and minerals that you need.

Q. What if it's a busy day, my fridge is empty and I have no time to make a meal from scratch?

A. Use a frozen, ready-to-eat meal. Add protein (e.g. canned legumes, hard-boiled eggs or grated cheese) and fresh or frozen vegetables to make it more nutritious. Or pick up a barbecued chicken from the grocery store on the way home, add a salad and a whole grain roll.

Q. What about eating out?

A. You can still eat out and enjoy a healthy meal. Eating in restaurants is a simple pleasure we all enjoy, as is the occasional takeout or delivery. But since restaurant portions tend to be a lot bigger than homemade meals, it might be helpful to recall some mindful eating strategies. If you do eat out, consider:

- ☐ Instead of ordering an appetizer and an entrée, order two appetizers
- ☐ Request a smaller portion, share the meal or bring leftovers home
- ☐ Share a dessert

Q. What about consuming alcohol?

A. Discuss with your physician.

Q. What about nutrient or herbal-based products?

A. Discuss with your physician.

Q. Why no more than two cups of caffeinated beverages a day?

A. Caffeine can disrupt your sleep and increase your stress level. Try decaffeinated tea or coffee.

Q. What if I am a vegetarian or vegan?

A. If so, speak with a Registered Dietitian about how to ensure that you are having balanced nutrition and getting enough nutrients, including vitamins and minerals. Go to [www.dietitians.ca](http://www.dietitians.ca) and under "Find a Dietitian," locate one in your area.

## Jane's Story, Part 2

Jane is happy to learn that she can gradually make some changes to her eating and sleeping habits to improve her mood, energy and stress level. Over the next few months, she starts to plan her meals for the week, make a grocery list and then shop once or twice a week. She now brings lunch and snacks, prepared at home, to school. She buys a slow cooker so that at the end of the day she can come home to a warm meal.

## Summary

It's not easy to "eat healthy" in today's society. You can be proud of yourself for thinking about making changes. Any changes that you make, even if they are gradual, will set you on the path to a lifetime of wellness.

## Helpful Resources

Canada's Physical Activity Guide – National Physical Activity Plan. [www.physicalactivityplan.org/resources/CPAG.pdf](http://www.physicalactivityplan.org/resources/CPAG.pdf)

Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres of Ottawa.

Check with your local health unit for free services and programs such as cooking classes.

[www.coalitionottawa.ca](http://www.coalitionottawa.ca).

Eat Right Ontario | 1-877-510-5102

[www.eatrightontario.ca](http://www.eatrightontario.ca)

## References

Dietitians of Canada Position Paper 2012, "Promoting Mental Health through Healthy Eating and Nutritional Care." <https://www.dietitians.ca/Downloads/Public/Nutrition-and-Mental-Health-complete-2012.aspx>

Dietitians of Canada. "The Mediterranean Diet: A Guide to Healthy Eating." Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition (PEN). Updated 2017-03-29.

Dietitians of Canada. "Eating Guidelines for Omega-3 Fats." Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition (PEN). Updated 2013-11-11.

Firth, J., Stubbs, B., Sarris, J., et al. "The effects of vitamin and mineral supplementation on symptoms of schizophrenia: a systematic review and meta-analysis." *Psychological Medicine*, Pages 1–13. Cambridge University Press. 2017. doi:10.1017/S003329171700022

Trasande L et al.: Food Additives and Child Health, *Paediatrics*, July 2018.

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2018/07/19/peds.2018-1408>

"Vitamin D and Calcium: Updated Dietary Reference Intakes." 3/20/2012. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/vitamin/vita-d-eng.php>



---

## About This Document

---

Written by Debbie Gomez, Registered Dietician, and Alexandra Birk-Urovitz, Medical Student, uOttawa. Special thanks to Dr. Mark Norris, Paediatrician, CHEO; Casey Gray, Centre for Healthy Active Living, CHEO; Dr. Annick Buchholz, Centre for Healthy Active Living, CHEO; Maya Moser; Eva Schacherl for writing and editing.

---

## Disclosures

---

The authors of this document report no financial interest in, and/or affiliation with, a commercial organization that may have a direct or indirect connection to the content of this document.

---

## Disclaimer

---

Information in this pamphlet is offered 'as is' and is meant only to provide general information that supplements, but does not replace, the information from your health provider. Always contact a qualified health professional for further information in your specific situation or circumstance.

---

## Creative Commons License

---

You are free to copy and distribute this material in its entirety as long as 1) this material is not used in any way that suggests we endorse you or your use of the material, 2) this material is not used for commercial purposes (non-commercial), 3) this material is not altered in any way (no derivative works). View full license at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/>