

What is Normal Eating?

This resource is for young people and adolescents who have disordered eating behaviours. It provides information on normal eating principles and tips to assist families with the refeeding process and recovery.

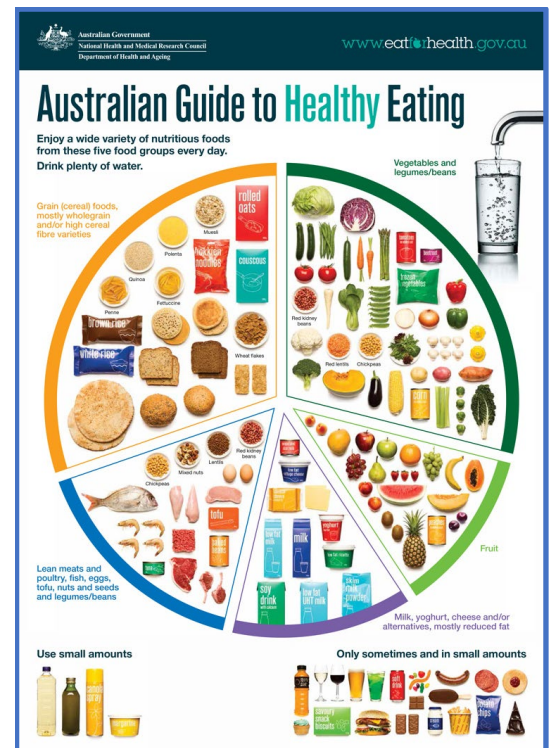
What is normal eating?

Normal eating is being able to eat when you are hungry, choose foods you like, eat until you feel satisfied, and not just stopping because you think you should. Normal eating is flexible. It is not measuring, weighing or counting foods. The most important step to normal eating is eating regularly. Regular eating patterns help prevent disordered eating behaviours. Irregular eating patterns can lead to poor nutrition, which can lead to symptoms like tiredness, dizziness, and mood fluctuations.

Normal eating is eating regularly and having a diet that includes a variety of foods, this is essential for good health, a strong immune system, and helps the body repair itself during times of injury or illness. If you have struggled with being able to eat regularly, you may be unsure about what "regular eating" actually looks like.

Regular eating for a young person generally means eating every 2-3 hours:

- Breakfast
- Mid morning snack (recess)
- Lunch
- Mid afternoon snack (after school)
- Dinner
- Evening snack (before bed)



For more information

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Government of South Australia

Women's and Children's Health Network

What does my body need to be its best?

Your body needs nutrients from food to function properly, keep you feeling your best and prevent health problems. Protein, fats, carbohydrates, fibre, minerals and vitamins are all essential nutrients. Your body uses different nutrients for different purposes, so it is important to provide your body with a balance of all essential nutrients. To ensure this, we need to eat a wide variety of different foods.

Carbs for energy.

Carbohydrates are the best fuel for our brain and muscles—think of them as the petrol that keeps a car running. There are different types of carbs: some, like sugar, honey, and certain fruits, are digested quickly and provide a fast burst of energy. Others digest more slowly, releasing energy gradually to help maintain steady blood sugar levels, support concentration during schoolwork, and sustain you through extended physical activities like a netball game.

To keep your body fuelled throughout the day, choose a variety of carbohydrate-rich foods such as breakfast cereals, bread, rice, noodles, pasta, and crackers with every meal and snack.

Protein for growth and repair.

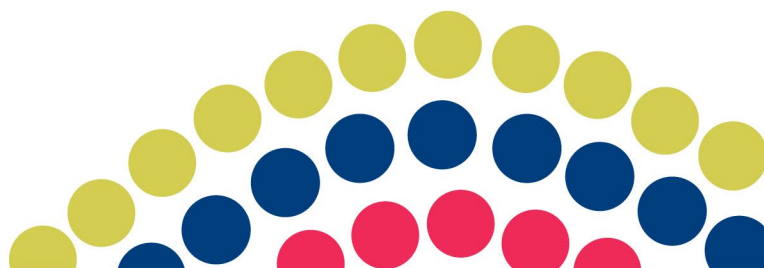
Protein foods provide us with essential nutrients like iron, calcium and zinc. These foods give us energy but also help our immune system and are the building blocks of our muscles and cells. Protein foods also help maintain healthy skin and hair!

Include a protein food like red meat, chicken, fish, eggs, lentils, or tofu at each meal. Protein foods like nuts or dairy can be enjoyed as a snack between meals.

Healthy oils and spreads are essential fats.

Our body needs a certain amount of essential fat for functions such as hormone production. Essential fats cannot be made within our body so we have to get them from the foods we eat. Fats are needed to absorb vitamins like Vitamin A, D, E and K. Vitamin A is particularly important for eye health. Vitamin D is important for bone and muscle health as it helps absorb calcium to develop strong bones. Vitamin E boosts your immune system, and Vitamin K is important for helping your blood to clot (stops bleeding when you get injured). Fat is also needed to maintain healthy skin and hair, protects our organs from injury, maintains our body temperature and helps every cell in our body to function.

Use oils like canola or olive oil in cooking or as spreads. Nuts and nut spreads, seeds and seed spreads, olives, fish and avocado are also good sources of essential fats.



Fruit and vegetables for antioxidants.

Different coloured fruits and vegetables provide a range of vitamins and minerals, which help to protect our body and keep us healthy. They are also a good source of fibre to keep our bowels regular.

What about 'sometimes' foods?

Additional foods or 'sometimes' foods like cakes, biscuits, chocolate, chips and takeaway foods are part of normal eating. It is helpful not to label these foods as "bad" or "junk" foods but foods that are eaten sometimes. Having these foods 'sometimes' is okay and is often part of social gatherings.

What about foods I don't like?

Food dislikes are common among young people who are struggling to eat regularly and in appropriate amounts to maintain their health.

You may have developed rules or strong ideas about certain foods, which you now avoid, but previously enjoyed eating. It is important to reintroduce these foods into your diet by involving your family in mealtimes and trusting them to provide you with snacks and meals. This is an important part of recovery while you are learning how to trust your body's hunger and fullness cues.

How much should I be eating?

As a teenager your nutritional needs are higher to help you grow and develop to your potential. If you have lost weight because you are not eating enough, your needs are even higher. This may feel like you need to eat a lot but it is an important part of recovery.

The Australia guide to healthy eating is a good start, then if needed this can be reviewed by your medical team/dietitian.



For parents/carers:

An important part of recovery is for parents/carers to support their child during meal times.

Food is needed to improve nutritional status, but you are also likely to see improvements in your child or adolescent's mood and behaviours as their nutrition intake improves. Mealtimes can be a difficult time for families, but remember, food is medicine!

Remember, your child has not eaten regular meals for a while and will not necessarily feel hungry during recovery, so it is important to eat at set times, and encourage them to eat all their meals even if they do not feel hungry- their appetite will return over time as their nutritional status improves.

When a young person is struggling with regular eating and is requiring weight gain to improve their health, the following tips may be useful for managing meal times.

- Try to have at least one family meal together per day, in a relaxed environment
- Avoid making special meals – provide what the rest of the family is eating.
- Give positive feedback and recognition of effort
- Speak to your child in a firm but calm tone
- Be confident and set clear expectations
- Avoid watching your child eat during meals or comment on their intake
- Avoid arguments over food and eating
- Avoid commenting on calorie, sugar, fat or using language to describe food such as "healthy" "good" "junk"
- Discourage any ritualistic food behaviours such as excessive chopping of food, weighing or measuring portions
- Avoid diet products or special foods which have been introduced during the time your child has reduced their intake i.e. almond milk
- Avoid comments about body weight, shapes, sizes

