



Epilepsy and a Healthy Diet

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Facts about eating patterns

Eating irregular meals can cause changes to your blood sugar levels which may affect how you feel and how your body functions. Eating well balanced meals regularly can help increase your energy levels and boost your immune system, which may help you to feel more positive and reduce the risk of seizures.

What foods make up a 'healthy diet'?

Your diet needs to include a wide variety of foods from all three of the food groups: fats, carbohydrates and proteins.

Adults should aim to eat no more than 70g of fats per day – with most of these coming from mono-unsaturated fats such as using olive oil in cooking and olive oil spreads. We should reduce our use of vegetable oils and increase our intake of omega 3 fats. We can consume small amounts of saturated fats but should avoid trans fats as much as possible.

Most of our diet should be made up of 'complex carbohydrates'. These include high fibre foods such as wholegrain bread, cereal, pasta and rice, along with a variety of fruit and vegetables. Try to avoid refined sugars and syrups like those found in fizzy drinks, sweets, cakes, biscuits and adding sugar to hot drinks.

Protein can be found in meat and fish, but also in tofu (soya bean curd), dairy products, nuts, seeds, pulses and legumes (lentils and beans). It is good to choose lean cuts of meat and remove any skin as this is where saturated fat can be found. Oily fish such as mackerel, salmon and sardine are good sources of protein and also contain healthy omega 3 fats.

An important way to maintain a healthy body weight is to balance calorie intake with physical exercise. Calories are units of energy contained in foods. If a food source contains a high number of calories but you do not use all the energy (in your day-to-day activities through exercise) you are likely to gain weight.

Eating '5 a day'

We should eat a range of different coloured fruit and vegetables each day as each colour relates to a different set of vitamins and minerals called phytonutrients. Eating a variety (as recommended) gives our bodies all the vitamins and minerals it needs to function well. Fruit and vegetables also contain valuable antioxidants which can help to protect the body from damage.

What is a 'balanced diet'?

A balanced diet is one made up of a mixture of carbohydrates, proteins and fats. It is important to eat a variety of foods from all three food groups.

- Carbohydrates release energy into the body and feed the brain.
- Proteins build and support your muscles, hormones, enzymes, red blood cells and your immune system.
- Fats help your body to absorb certain nutrients, warm the body, promote healthy cell function and can be used for energy.

You may have heard of diets such as low fat diets, low carbohydrate diets or GI diets. Some foods are better for you than others, but getting the right balance of the different types of carbohydrates, proteins and fats is also important.

Fats

Some people eat too much of the wrong types of fat and become overweight.

However, some fatty acids are essential nutrients, meaning that they can't be produced in the body from other nutrients and so need to be eaten as part of our diet to enable our bodies to function well.

All other fats required by the body can be produced in the human body without being eaten.

Which fats are best for our bodies?

You should know about four types of fats:

- **Monounsaturated fats (omega-9 fats) such as olive oil, avocados, almonds and macadamia nuts.** Research suggests that eating omega-9 fats can lower cholesterol, reduce the hardening of arteries, improve immune function and provide protection against certain types of cancer.
- **Polyunsaturated fats include two main types:** omega-3 and omega-6. Some foods contain both omega-3 and omega-6 fats. Oily fish such as mackerel, salmon, sardines, herring, anchovies and fish oil supplements (e.g. cod liver oil) contain high levels of omega-3 which can be extremely good for you. Omega-3 fats can help you maintain a healthy heart, skin and bones, as well as boost your energy levels and your ability to deal with stress. Foods that contain omega-6 fats include sunflower, pumpkin and sesame seeds, pine nuts, pistachio nuts, chicken, and grapeseed, vegetable and sunflower oils.
- **Saturated fats are mainly found in animal products such as butter, cream and animal fats.** Saturated fats are associated with increased 'bad' cholesterol and are thought to increase the risk of coronary heart disease - which can lead to angina, heart attacks and strokes. Aim to eat foods that contain less than 5g of saturated fats per 100g.
- **Trans fats are mostly found in processed foods such as cakes, biscuits and margarine as these give foods a longer shelf life.** However, these trans fats are extremely difficult for your body to break down. As a result these can cause a number of health problems. Trans fats can raise 'bad' cholesterol levels and decrease 'good' cholesterol levels.

Some research also suggests that diets high in trans fats can increase your risk of a number of cancers. Aim to eat as little trans fats as you can by avoiding processed foods and by being aware of the words 'trans' or 'hydrogenated' in the list of ingredients of any food product.

Are some carbohydrates better than others?

If your seizures are triggered by changes in blood sugar levels eating low to medium GI foods may help to reduce your seizures.

Low GI

Wholewheat pasta and bread, brown rice, new potatoes, sweet potatoes, noodles, wheat tortilla.

Kidney beans, lentils, chickpeas and any other pulses or beans. Milk, soya milk, yoghurt. All vegetables, salad items, fruit, nuts.



Medium GI

Porridge oats, white pitta bread, croissant, digestives, crispbread. Honey, mango, sultanas, bananas, raisins. Ice cream. Baked beans.



High GI

Brown and white bread, honey, crackers, noodles, tiger oats, rice crispies. Jasmine rice. Sports drinks such as Energade and Powerade.

