For much of history, man's nutritional concerns have centered around hunting, foraging, cultivating, or otherwise obtaining food that was in relatively short supply. In fact our bodies are exquisitely designed to use and store energy from food (in the form of fat) in ways that allow us to survive times of scarcity. While this is a great advantage during periods of famine, at times when food is superabundant (like in Western society today) obesity occurs at epidemic rates, along with serious obesity-related health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and a number of cancers.

Over the past several decades many theories have been proposed regarding food, health, and the best approaches to losing weight. Indeed, research on nutrition continues at a fast pace and our understanding of optimal nutrition is still evolving. What might have seemed like an unassailable nutritional fact a few years ago can be completely overturned by the next scientific study.

There are so many contradicting nutritional claims vying for our attention that it's easy to be uncertain about what we should or shouldn't eat. Fortunately, there are some guidelines we can apply to our lives with confidence.

Eat your fruits and vegetables. Remember when you really wanted French fries but your mom made you eat broccoli instead? Good for you, mom. Fruits and vegetables (sorry, French fries don't really count) carry a wide variety of nutrients including vitamins, minerals, fiber, and various plant-derived chemicals known to have healthful benefits. The old "five a day" campaign taught that we should all get five servings daily of fruits and vegetables, but newer research indicates that people who eat seven or more servings each day gain the most benefits.

Know your fats. Several decades ago, fats were declared Public Enemy No. 1 with regard to heart health, but the truth is that not all fats are created equal. Some, like monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are recognized to have healthful effects, while trans fats are, plain and simple, bad news. There are even studies now suggesting that saturated fats, a type that had been demonized by nutrition experts for years, might not be quite as bad as feared. In any event, it's worth keeping in mind that all fats are dense in calories.

Know your carbs. Back when fats were pronounced the main cause of heart disease, food manufacturers in the U.S. rushed to provide foods that were low in fat. The replacements that hit the market, however, were typically loaded with carbohydrates. Interestingly enough, instead of becoming healthier on the whole, Americans started gaining weight at a record rate. The reason for this may have something to do with the way our bodies process carbs. Simple carbohydrates (refined sugars, high fructose corn syrup, and bleached flour, for example) deliver sugar quickly to your bloodstream. This can provoke a swift release of insulin into your bloodstream, causing glucose (blood sugar) to be taken up by cells (including adipose cells, a.k.a. fat cells). The result – a spike in blood sugar, followed by a "crash" that leaves the eater feeling not-so-hot.

On the other hand, complex carbohydrates (carbs that are digested more slowly) can curb hunger for a longer period of time. Complex carbohydrates are found in foods that are high in fiber, including fruits, vegetable, and whole grains.

Watch your salt intake. Too much sodium in the diet is strongly linked with high blood pressure, which in turn contributes to the risk of heart disease and stroke. The USDA's current nutritional guidelines say that sodium should be limited to 2,300 mg per day for most healthy people and 1,500 mg per day for those who are age 51 or older, African Americans, and those
with high blood pressure, diabetes, or kidney disease. These amounts include sodium added by
the food manufacturer as well as whatever you might sprinkle from the salt shaker. The
American Heart Association recommends a daily limit of 1,500 mg of sodium for everyone.
According to one estimate, between 500,000 and 1.2 million cardiovascular disease deaths
could be prevented over the next 10 years if everyone met that goals.

**Less processing is better.** Processed foods tend to be much higher in fats (especially trans
fats), salt, and added sugar than foods that you prepare yourself. A pretty good rule of thumb:
the closer a food is to its natural state, the healthier it's likely to be, while the more processed a
food item is (whether it comes from a supermarket or a fast food restaurant) the less healthy it's
likely to be. Does that mean you can never eat a doughnut? Of course not, but it does mean
that fruits and vegetable are a much better daily snack choice.

**It's not just what you eat, it's how much.** You've probably heard commercials on the radio or
seen ads on the Internet pitching some supplement that will allow you to eat as much as you
like and lose weight. News flash—that supplement doesn't really exist.

A calorie is a measure of the amount of energy a food contains. Our bodies have the
ability to take the energy in most foods and store it (in the form of fat) for later use. The more
calories you consume, the greater your weight gain will be, so be conscious not only of what
you eat but how much (and how many calories) you're eating.

In summary, getting the right nutrition for you and your family takes a little bit of effort but it's
pretty simple: read food labels, eat the right kind of foods, and eat in moderation. When you
crave something high in sugar, salt or fat, make it the occasional snack, not your regular fare.
Healthy eating isn't about following a lot of rigid rules but being smart about what you eat most
of the time. For more information, check out [http://www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)

Finally, some simple conversions to keep in mind:
- 1 gram of fat = 9 calories
- 4 grams of sugar = 16 calories = 1 level teaspoon of table sugar
- 1 level teaspoon of salt = 2,000 milligrams of sodium
- 1 gram of protein = 4 calories

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*This article was prompted by a Focus on the Family radio broadcast called "Sound Advice on
Healthy Eating I-III" featuring David Meinz, R.D. Listen at:*
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