



FROM THE  
**nutrition** *corner*

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## what's a balanced diet, anyway?

*Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.*

—Michael Pollan

“**E**at a balanced diet.” We hear that from everyone, it seems; even a TV commercial for a clearly not-so-healthy food urges you to eat that junk as “part of a balanced diet.” Whomever you see for health concerns has probably advised this, perhaps without further explanation—leaving you to either fill in the blanks or spin in needless confusion.

Balanced eating shouldn't feel like a too-complicated math equation, although it may be more nuanced than the diet-du-jour currently making the rounds on social media. And what about all those trendy diets—Keto, Paleo, Macros, any-other-O, flexitarian, Whole30—are they balanced? When considering how to eat to maintain your balance, remember that needs shift with age and other factors. What's “perfect” for your neighbor or fellow gym-goer—or even for you at a previous age—may no longer be so perfect now.

### NO ONE SIZE FITS ALL

Still, it's human nature to crave simplicity. When asked for the nutritional “golden rule,” I point out that breast milk is perfectly balanced food for an infant, with 50 percent of its calories derived from fat supporting healthy development. Yet I don't recommend 50 percent fat—or breast milk—for adults!

Supporting development and growth is the primary concern throughout childhood, culminating in adolescence, a time of even more rapid growth and change. Adolescents require increased amounts of specific nutrients, particularly the bone-building ones, since most bone density is determined during adolescence and into young adulthood.

Most people know that pregnancy and lactation bring increased requirements for specific nutrients and overall energy. But I also see a lot of perimenopausal and menopausal women in my practice who complain of belly fat they suddenly can't lose with their usual diet and exercise techniques. That's because hormones, too, influence how we absorb and metabolize nutrients, so a balanced diet for a middle-aged woman will look different than one for her younger self.

Advanced age brings specific concerns, like under-nutrition. Older adults face a higher risk of vitamin and mineral deficiency. They also have fewer hunger and thirst cues, so my balanced diet recommendation to a senior might emphasize cooking or eating with friends as much as emphasizing any specific nutrient or so-called superfood.

### GUIDES FOR HEALTHY CHOICES

Illness or surgery, heavy physical demands, and bio-individuality make it impossible to define one-size-fits-all diet criteria. But for healthy adults in general, a nutritious diet entails balancing your choices. Michael Pollan's well-known advice—to “*Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.*”—is a pretty good, and simple guideline. “*Food*” means unprocessed food; “*Not too much*” means moderation. “*Mostly plants*” means add more plant-based protein choices like beans, while moderating meat intake.

And, as you probably already know, an easy guideline to follow is to consume less “don'ts”: less processed food, trans-fat-laden fast food, less sugar. And to balance less healthy choices with the “dos.”

- **Do** eat a wide array of fruits and vegetables—emphasis on vegetables—which contain fiber, vitamins, and other phytonutrients.
- **Do** consume moderate amounts of whole grains, another healthy source of vitamins and nutrients.
- **Do** eat sufficient, varied lean protein—lean meats and/or beans and legumes—while remaining mindful of the high saturated fat content in some meats. But don't skip on healthy, anti-inflammatory fats such as olive oil, a variety of nuts and seeds, and avocados..

If all else fails, remember this: *eat your vegetables*. Trendy diets may come and go, but that is the one eating pillar proven to lower your risk for chronic disease. That's as close as I come in my practice to one-size-fits-most! **hkt**

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Sharon Price, MS (Nutrition), MBA became passionate about nutrition following her own journey recovering from Lyme disease. She now offers that same personalized counseling to help individuals and families navigate the often-complex interplay between food and health—taking a special interest in gut health, autoimmune conditions, food allergies, and hormone balance. Her approach is simple: take the “heavy lifting” out of wellness, helping individuals and families savor good health without feeling enslaved to its pursuit. You can reach Sharon at 919-322-8230 or [sharon@notsohardnutrition.com](mailto:sharon@notsohardnutrition.com), or on her website: [www.notsohardnutrition.com](http://www.notsohardnutrition.com)