

BALANCED EATING DISCUSSION GUIDE

The following discussion guide is adapted from the resources at [MyPlate.Gov](https://www.myplate.gov) and based on the **2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans** developed by the United States Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

Note for facilitator – it is important to always create a welcoming and judgment-free environment when engaging in a group conversation about health and wellness. No one knows the background or history of every individual in the room and the challenges, or lack thereof, they have had in navigating health and wellness issues.

We are going to have a conversation about balanced eating. This is a serious topic that affects all of us and can be really sensitive for members. Being honest, open, and non-judgmental of each other during our conversation will help us learn more about balanced eating and each other.

Today's discussion is based on the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Health and Human Services. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans was first published in 1980 and has been updated every five years since. The Guidelines are intended to provide science-based advice on what to eat and drink to promote health, reduce the risk of chronic disease, and meet nutrient needs.

Show participants the Balanced Eating poster.

Discussion question: What stands out to you in the Balanced Eating poster?

Solicit a few participant responses, then walk through the key poster messages.

The primary poster message is that small changes matter in terms of balanced eating. In each corner of the poster, viewers will see a snack or food that might be commonly eaten by college students (tacos, cereal, ramen, Doritos) alongside potential alternative foods that could help achieve balanced eating (e.g., banana and broccoli, eggs and bacon, cheese and almonds, and low-sodium popcorn, which is a whole grain snack).

SMALL CHANGES MATTER

Discussion question: What is meant by "Small Changes Matter" in terms of balanced eating?

Solicit a few participant responses. Mention the following if not already shared:

- The benefits of balanced eating add up over time, bite by bite.
- Learning and committing to a simple, balanced eating approach is likely a more effective long-term approach than attempting a restrictive short-term diet program.
- Most likely, achieving balanced eating will only require making small adjustments to what you currently normally eat. The key is don't overthink it! Achieving balanced eating is not as complicated as you might perceive.

FOCUS ON WHOLE FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

As we have discussed, the poster highlights small changes that can be made to help bring us closer to a balanced eating approach. One such change is composing about half of your plate at each meal with whole fruits and vegetables.

Discussion question: What are the benefits of eating whole fruits and vegetables?

Solicit a few participant responses. Mention the following if not already shared:

- People who eat fruits and vegetables as part of an overall balanced diet are likely to have a reduced risk of some diseases.
- Fruit and vegetables provide nutrients vital for the health and maintenance of the body.
- Most fruits and vegetables are low in fat, sodium, cholesterol, and calories.

MOVE TO LOW-FAT OR FAT-FREE DAIRY MILK OR YOGURT

Most adults are recommended to consume 3 cups of fat-free or low-fat dairy per day. This can come from milk, yogurt, or cheese. It can also come from lactose-free milk and fortified soy milk or yogurt.

Discussion question: Why is it important to eat or drink dairy?

Solicit a few participant responses. Mention the following if not already shared:

- Eating or drinking dairy products offers health benefits, like building and maintaining strong bones.
- Important nutrients from dairy include calcium, potassium, vitamin D, and protein.
- Most people do not consume enough potassium. Diets rich in potassium can help maintain healthy blood pressure.
- Vitamin D helps the body maintain proper levels of calcium and phosphorous, which helps to build and maintain bones. Milk and soy milk that are fortified with vitamin D are good sources of this nutrient. Other sources include some fish, such as salmon, and foods fortified with vitamin D.

VARY YOUR PROTEIN ROUTINE

Eat a variety of protein foods to get more of the nutrients your body needs. Meat and poultry choices should be lean or low-fat, like 93% lean ground beef, pork loin, and skinless chicken breasts. Choose seafood options that are higher in healthy fatty acids (called omega-3s) and lower in methylmercury, such as salmon, anchovies, and trout. If you are vegetarian or vegan, consider vegetarian protein options such as beans, peas, lentils, nuts, seeds, and soy products.

Discussion question: Why is it important to select a variety of choices from the Protein Foods Group?

Solicit a few participant responses. Mention the following if not already shared:

- Many people get the right amount of protein needed from meat, poultry, and eggs but do not meet the recommendations for seafood or nuts, seeds, and soy products.
- Meeting the recommendations can help increase the amount of important nutrients your body needs, like unsaturated fats, dietary fiber, and vitamin D.

- It also helps limit the amount of sodium and saturated fats you get from processed meat and poultry.

Foods in the protein food group can often be the most expensive. Eating a balanced diet can be done within a tight budget. Consider downloading the MyPlate app on your phone and using the Shop Simple tool within the app to find savings in your area and discover new ways to prepare budget-friendly meals.

CHOOSE WHOLE GRAINS WHEN POSSIBLE

Grains have two subgroups: whole grains and refined grains. To achieve balanced eating, you want to target making half of your grains whole grains.

Whole grains have the entire grain kernel. Some whole-grain examples are whole-wheat flour, bulgur (cracked wheat), oatmeal, and brown rice.

Refined grains have been milled, a process that removes the bran and germ. This is done to give grains a finer texture and improve their shelf life. But it also removes dietary fiber, iron, and many B vitamins. Some examples of refined grain products are white flour, corn grits, white bread, and white rice.

Refined grains should ideally be enriched. This means adding back certain B vitamins (thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, folic acid) and iron. However, fiber is not added back to enriched grains. Check the ingredient list on refined grain products. The word “enriched” should appear in the grain name.

Discussion question: Why is it important to eat grains, especially whole grains?

Solicit a few participant responses. Mention the following if not already shared:

- Grains provide many nutrients that are vital for the health and maintenance of our bodies.
- Nutrients provided through grains include complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber, several B vitamins, and minerals (iron, magnesium, and selenium).
- Fiber from whole grains can help reduce blood cholesterol levels and can lower the risk of heart disease.
- The B vitamins thiamin, riboflavin, and niacin play a key role in metabolism – they help the body release energy from protein, fat, and carbohydrates. B vitamins are also essential for a healthy nervous system.
- Whole grains are sources of magnesium and selenium. Magnesium is a mineral used in building bones and releasing energy from muscles. Selenium protects cells from oxidation. It is also important for a healthy immune system.

Remember, small changes matter in achieving balanced eating. It likely does not require wholesale changes to your lifestyle or current eating habits. Making small incremental adjustments to what we place on our plate will



result in longstanding changes to what we eat and, as a result, improve our overall health.

Consider downloading the MyPlate app for more information and tools to put into practice what we discussed today.