

Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland



# HEALTHY WEIGHT AND HEALTHY EATING



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# This Essential Guide is about healthy eating and weight.

It explains:

- How your diet can affect you.
- How your weight can affect you.
- Which foods are good for you.
- How to manage your weight.

## **This booklet is only the start.**

Diet and weight are complicated, nuanced topics, and the science on nutrition is constantly developing. This booklet offers guidelines, not rules. It is important to do your own research to find something that suits your personal needs.

# Healthy eating

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is one of the most important things you can do for your body. Healthy eating supports your immune system, gives you energy, and supports a better mood. Eating well can also lower your risk of serious health conditions like heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

## A healthy, balanced diet:

- includes a wide variety of foods, with all the nutrients and energy your body needs
- is low in saturated fat, salt, and sugar
- is high in fruits, vegetables, fibre, nuts, whole grains (like oats or brown rice) and pulses (like lentils or beans).

**Important:** If you have a long-term condition like heart disease or diabetes, speak to your doctor before making big changes to your diet.



# Healthy weight

Weight is not the only or most important metric of your health, but being overweight or underweight can lead to health problems.

## Being overweight can:



### **Put extra strain on your heart.**

Your heart has to work harder to pump blood around a larger body, increasing blood pressure and increasing the risk of high cholesterol, heart disease, and stroke.



**Affect your breathing** and worsen breathing problems like asthma.



**Add extra pressure to your joints** and cartilage, which can cause pain.



**Cause fatty buildup** in your arteries and around your organs. This can increase the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

## Being underweight or undernourished can:



**Damage your heart** and other organs, which no longer have the energy to function properly. This can increase your risk of organ failures.



**Damage your bones and joints**, causing pain and weakness.



**Weaken your immune system**, making you more susceptible to other diseases.



**Cause anaemia**, dizziness, and fatigue.

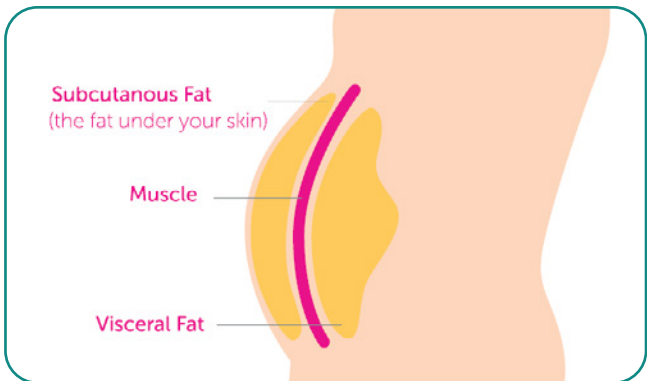
Reaching a healthy weight, either by losing or gaining weight, can help to reduce these risks. It can also increase your energy levels and help you to feel good about yourself.

# Visceral fat

You have two main types of fat: subcutaneous fat, which is the fat just under your skin, and visceral fat, which sits around your organs.

Excess **visceral** fat is linked to many health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, coronary disease, and even some cancers.

The size of your waist or belly can help to tell you if you are carrying too much visceral fat. This is more important in understanding your health risks than your overall weight.



# Factors in your weight

**Diet and food intake** is a large part of putting on and taking off weight (and is discussed throughout this leaflet). However, there are also other factors:

**Exercise and activity.** More exercise can cause you to lose weight, and low activity can lead to putting on weight.

**Genetics.** Some people are genetically more likely to convert food to fat at a higher rate.

**Body type.** People with different body shapes may put on more fat in certain places, or have a different balance of subcutaneous and visceral fat.

**Stress, illness, and medication.** All of these can change how your body processes fat, which can lead to changes in weight.

# How do I know if I am a healthy weight?

The surest way to tell whether you are at a healthy weight and size is to ask a professional - a dietitian, physiotherapist, or doctor.

There are measures you can use at home, but all of these are only approximate, and do not take account of your body type, existing health risks, or other factors like the ratio of subcutaneous to visceral fat.

It is important to know that most standard measures used for weight in the UK are calculated based on people from a white European background. If you are not from this background, make sure you look specifically for target values for your ethnicity.

The next few pages cover some ways to estimate whether you are at a healthy weight.



## Waist circumference

Your waist size can help to tell you how much body fat you have, and helps to estimate how much is visceral fat.

Measure around your waist from just above your belly button (just under your ribs and above your hipbones). The box below tells you what your waist size says about your risk of health problems from too much body fat.

**This metric does not tell you your risk of health problems from too little body fat.**

### WAIST SIZE MEASUREMENTS

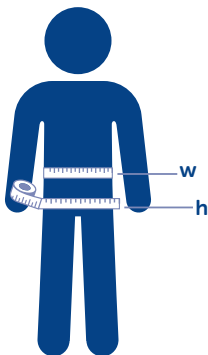
	Low risk	High risk	Very high risk
	Less than 80cm	80cm to 87cm	88cm or more
	Less than 94cm	94cm to 101cm	102cm or more

## Waist-to-hip ratio

This ratio is a good way to measure body size while accounting for differences in body type.

Measure around your waist as before. Then, measure around your hips and buttocks at their **widest point**, making sure that the measuring tape sits flat against your body.

Divide the waist measurement by the hip measurement to get your waist-to-hip ratio. For women, the ideal ratio is **below 0.85**. For men, the ideal ratio is **below 1.00**. If you come out with a significantly higher number than this, consider losing weight.



## Body Mass Index (BMI)

BMI is the most commonly used measure of healthy weight. It tells you whether your weight is normal for your height.

It is important to remember that BMI is a **population-wide measure**. This means that it was designed for scientific studies about populations, not for individual use. BMI does not account for different body types or for the fact that muscle weighs more than fat.

You can access BMI charts online (search "BMI calculator") or by asking your doctor.

To find your BMI on the chart, match your weight (along the top or bottom of the chart) against your height (along the sides).

A BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 is generally considered "normal" or healthy. If you are significantly outside this range in either direction, it may be cause for concern.

# Other benefits of healthy eating

It isn't all about weight! Even if you are at a healthy weight, it is always good to try to eat a healthy, balanced diet. A healthy diet not only has the right amount of energy and fat, it also provides the vitamins, minerals, and nutrients your body needs. This can include taking supplements if recommended by your doctor.

A proper balance of these nutrients can offer:

- Increased energy.
- A stronger immune system.
- Better moods.
- Better concentration.
- Stronger bones and muscles.
- Reduced risk of disease.
- Healthier skin, teeth, and hair.



# How can I eat more healthily?\*

1. Choose wholegrain versions of starchy foods like rice, bread, and pasta.
2. Aim to eat at least 5 portions of different fruits and vegetables a day. Varying the colour of these vegetables (e.g. beetroot, parsnip, sweetcorn, etc) is also a good idea.
3. Eat plenty of beans and pulses, and limit red meat and fatty or processed meat.
4. Eat at least 2 portions of fish a week, including one of an oily fish like mackerel.
5. Limit saturated fat, salt, and sugar.
6. Drink 6-8 glasses of water or other non-alcoholic fluid a day.



*\*based on NHS Eatwell guide*

# Complex carbohydrates

Your body uses starch to store energy for slow release. Starchy foods (sometimes called “carbs” or “complex carbohydrates”) are foods like **potatoes, bread, rice, pasta, and cereals.**

Fibre (also called “roughage”) is not digested by the body. It helps to keep your digestive system healthy and regular. Fibre is found in starchy and plant-based foods: **fruits, vegetables, beans, lentils, oats, and grains.**



Where possible, choose **wholegrain** and **wholemeal** foods. These contain more fibre, as well as other vitamins.



You can also increase your fibre by eating potatoes and other vegetables with the **skins on.**

# Fruit and vegetables



Aim to eat at least **5 portions** of fruit and vegetables a day - ideally at least 2 portions of fruit and 3 of vegetables.



One portion of fruit or vegetables is about 80g, or a handful. Each portion needs to be different from the other portions you have had that day!



Fruit and vegetables can be **fresh, frozen, canned, or dried.**



Fruit juice can make up part of your 5 portions, but only **one portion a day** can be from juice. (A portion of juice is 150ml).



**Eat the rainbow!** Eating a range of different-coloured fruit and vegetables can provide a wider mix of vitamins and minerals.

# Dairy and dairy alternatives



Dairy - milk, yoghurt, cheese, etc.  
- provides calcium, protein, and vitamins.



Some dairy such as milk, cream, cheese, and butter can be high in sugar and saturated fat. If you are trying to lose weight, choose lower-fat, lower-sugar options, like cottage cheese or skimmed milk.



Many dairy alternatives are available, including plant milks and nutritional yeast cheese substitutes. These can also provide protein and calcium, but there is a lot of variation between dairy alternatives, so check the label!

# Protein



Good protein sources are **beans, pulses, fish, eggs, and meat**. Protein is used to build and repair your body's cells, and helps you feel fuller for longer.



Try to eat **2-3 portions of protein per day**. Each portion should be about the size of the palm of your hand.



Eat at least **2 portions of fresh or tinned fish a week**. This should include 1 portion of oily fish like salmon, sardines, or mackerel. These are great sources of omega-3, which helps to support brain function.



Try to eat less red meat, and less processed meat such as bacon and ham. Consider non-meat protein sources like nuts, tofu, or beans.

# Fats

There are three main types of fats: unsaturated fats, saturated fats, and trans fats. All fats are high in calories, which is important to remember if you are trying to lose weight.

## Unsaturated fats

- There are 2 types of unsaturated fat: monounsaturated and polyunsaturated.
- A small amount of unsaturated fat is good for you, and a necessary part of a healthy diet.
- Unsaturated fats are found in nuts, seeds, avocado, and vegetable oils like olive oil, canola (rapeseed) oil, and sunflower oil. They are also found in fish such as salmon and mackerel.



## Saturated fats

- Eating too much saturated fat is linked to high cholesterol and can increase your risk of heart disease.
- Foods high in saturated fat include: “hard” oils (coconut oil, butter, margarine, lard), biscuits and cakes, fatty meat, sausages, burgers, chocolate, cream, and ice-cream.
- Try to limit how much saturated fat you eat.



## Trans fats

- Trans fats are linked to increased risk of heart disease and stroke.
- Trans fats are found in foods like biscuits, cakes, pastries, and fried foods.
- Try to avoid trans fats where possible.



## Tips for reducing fat in your diet

Steam, boil, grill, or poach food instead of roasting or frying in oil.



Swap butter, lard, and ghee for canola oil, olive oil, or sunflower oil.

Cut down on baked or fried foods.

Cut down on processed or packaged foods. Try to make food from scratch if you can, with fresh ingredients.

Choose lean (low-fat) meats like chicken.

Remove the fat and skin from meat before cooking.

Skim off fat that rises to the top when cooking in liquid.

Choose reduced-fat dairy foods, like skimmed milk or soft cheese.

# Salt

Salt (also known as sodium chloride) contains sodium, which is needed to balance the amount of water in your body. Sodium also helps to keep muscles and nerves healthy.

However, too much sodium is bad for you. It increases the amount of water in your body, leading to high blood pressure and increasing your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Reducing the salt in your diet lowers your sodium intake and reduces these risks.

A healthy adult should eat no more than **6 grams of salt a day**. That's about **one level teaspoon**.



For more information on controlling your salt intake, check the CHSS booklet on **Salt**.



# Sugar

Sugar is high in “empty calories”, which provide you with energy but none of the nutrients you need. Too much sugar can cause weight gain and increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, or tooth decay.

Fruit and milk contain natural sugars, but are still part of a healthy diet.

Sugars which have been added to food or drinks, and sugars found in honey and syrups - are bad for you. This includes sugars from fruit juices and smoothies. A healthy adult should have no more than 30 grams of sugars per day. Or around 7 teaspoons.

Be aware that foods marketed as “low sugar” or “no sugar” often include artificial sweeteners, which are not good for you.

**Sugar may be given other names, like: fructose, glucose, high-fructose syrup, honey, maple or agave syrup, invert sugar, maltose, molasses, or sucrose.**

# Drinks

Drink at least 6-8 glasses of water or another non-alcoholic drink every day. Speak to your GP about what to do if you are on a fluid-restricted diet.

Look for drinks which are naturally low in sugar, caffeine, and sweeteners. This includes water, skimmed milk, and most herbal teas.

Remember what you drink can also contain sugar and fats, and is just as important as what you eat.

**Alcohol is high in “empty calories”**, and drinking too much alcohol can make you gain weight.

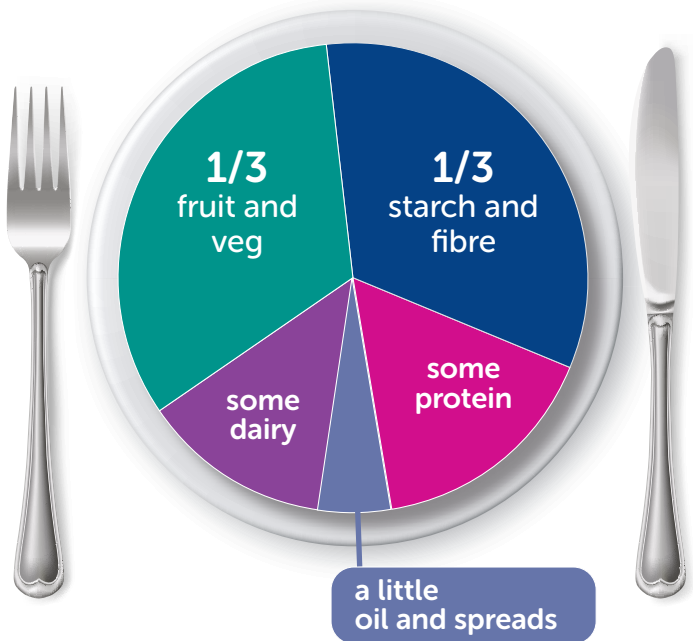
For more information on alcohol, see the CHSS booklet on **Alcohol**. You can also get support with reducing alcohol at: **[www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)** or phone Drinkline for free on **0300 123 1110**.



# The Eat Well Guide

The "Eat Well Guide" is a diagram developed by NHS nutritionists as an easy reference for how a balanced diet breaks down into five main food groups.

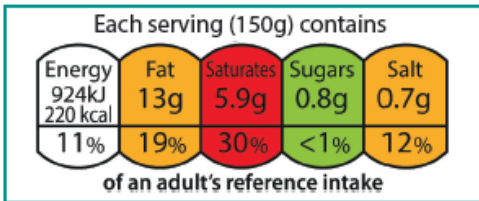
Aim for a diet that consists of:



# The traffic light nutrition label

Lots of packaged foods have a colour-coded “traffic light” nutrition label. This helps you to choose foods low in saturated fat, salt, and sugar. The values on these labels may be per serving or per 100g - this information will be shown on the label as below.

Check the label, and aim to eat more foods that are colour-coded green or amber.



You can also **check the ingredients list** for more details. Ingredients are listed in weight order, from highest to lowest amount. If things like oil, butter, cream, sugar, or salt are listed among the first few ingredients, the food may not be the most healthy choice.

# Healthy eating after a health event

It is important to remember that healthy eating is **not a one-size-fits-all approach**.

What you need from your diet depends on a range of things, such as:

- Your body type and metabolism.
- Your lifestyle.
- Your physical and mental state.

Even things like where you live and what time of year it is can affect your diet!

This means that, especially if you have just had a stroke, heart attack, or been diagnosed with an illness, it is important to **speak to a nutritionist or dietitian if possible**. They will be able to help you find a diet plan that works for your body and your health.

**The following pages give some guidelines on how our conditions can affect your dietary needs.**

## Healthy eating with a chest condition

Poor nutrition can weaken your breathing muscles, making chest problems worse. On the other hand, good nutrition can reduce your chance of developing related conditions.

Some people get short of breath when eating. This can make eating stressful, so try to eat things you enjoy, which are easy to eat.

Alongside a **balanced diet**, there is some evidence for eating **more**:

- **Starchy foods**, to improve energy levels.
- **High-protein foods**, for muscle strength.
- **Water**, to keep yourself hydrated which helps to clear mucus.

If you are taking steroids, **dairy** can help to reduce their negative impact on bone health.

Your weight is crucial to your breathing, so it is important to **be aware of your fat intake**.

If you are underweight, you may need more fats and oils in your diet!

# Healthy eating after a cardiovascular event

After a cardiovascular event (**stroke, heart attack, or heart disease**), diet is an important part of managing your condition.

Your health team should discuss this with you when you are diagnosed and/or discharged from hospital. Remember to ask questions if there is anything you're not sure of!

After a stroke, you may experience difficulty with eating and drinking. It is important to speak to your stroke team to make sure you understand how to eat and drink safely.

If you have trouble chewing or swallowing, you may need a diet with easier textures.

In general, it is important to maintain a balanced diet, and **limit your intake of:**

**Salt**

**Sugar**

**Saturated fats**

**Alcohol**

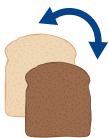
For people with cardiovascular problems, there is evidence for a diet containing **more:**

- **Fruits and vegetables**, for antioxidants.
- **Whole grains**, for fibre and folate.
- **Dairy**, for potassium and calcium - **probiotic yoghurt** is especially good as it helps to balance your cholesterol.
- **Oily fish**, for omega-3 fatty acids.
- **Some vegetable oils**, particularly olive, corn, and soy.
- **Garlic** for allicin, a compound which helps to lower cholesterol.
- **Foods high in vitamin E**, such as avocados, dark green vegetables, and whole grains.
- **Tea**, for antioxidants (but be aware that the caffeine in black tea may affect your heart, and that drinking tea with food can limit your iron uptake).

# Making successful changes to diet and weight



Break big goals down into small, achievable ones.



Be specific in your goals. Instead of saying "I want to eat more fibre", think about how you will do this - for example, "I'll swap white toast for wholemeal toast in the mornings."



Celebrate achievements, no matter how small.



Get support from a friend, family member, or group. There are also various apps available to track progress.



Plan your meals in advance.



Exercising can be made easier by choosing exercises you enjoy. Try walking, dancing, gardening, or anything else that gets you moving!



Don't lose too much weight too quickly. Losing more than 1kg (2lb) in a week may mean you're not getting the nutrition you need.



Look for different signs of progress - changes in how your clothes fit, how much energy you have, how much activity you can do, or how you feel.



Remember that the aim is to be healthy, not to look a certain way or get a certain number on the scale.



Don't give up! Everyone slips up now and then. Accept it as part of the process, remember what progress you have already made, and focus on moving forward.

Our publications are free to everyone in Scotland, in PDF and in print. See them all at [www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub](http://www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub)

For free, confidential advice and support from our Advice Line Team, contact:

**0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9am-4pm)**

**text ADVICE to 66777**

**[advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk)**

One in five people in Scotland are affected by chest, heart and stroke conditions or Long Covid. Go to [www.chss.org.uk/supportus](http://www.chss.org.uk/supportus) to find out how you can help us support more people in Scotland.

To give feedback or request alternative formats, email: [health.information@chss.org.uk](mailto:health.information@chss.org.uk)

**Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland**



**NO LIFE HALF LIVED**

Published: July 2024  
Next review: July 2027  
E2-v1.0-June2025



**Scan here to see  
all our resources!**

Scottish Charity (no SC018761)