Foods and Snacks that Pack Good Nutrition

What Does Nutrient-Dense Mean? The standard American diet is energy-rich and nutrient-poor. That is where the saying “empty calories” comes from, referring to foods that provide a lot of calories without much nutritional value.

Nutrient-dense foods are rich in vitamins, minerals and other nutrients important for health, without too much saturated fat, added sugars and sodium. These foods are basically fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fat-free or low-fat milk and dairy products, fish, lean meat and poultry, peas and beans, eggs, and nuts and seeds.

Nutrient Density is the amount of nutrients you get for the calories consumed. For example, you are looking at the labels trying to decide between two packages of bread. One has 80 calories per slice, but few vitamins and minerals. The whole-grain version has about the same number of calories, but more protein, magnesium, and double the fiber, potassium, vitamin B6 and zinc. The whole-grain option is the more nutrient-dense choice.

One way to identify nutrient-dense foods is called nutrient profiling—the science of ranking or classifying foods based on the nutrients they contain. Most of these tools look at beneficial nutrients (such as protein, calcium, vitamin D, potassium, vitamin C, and fiber), as well as those known to negatively affect health when eaten in excess (such as added sugars, saturated fat, trans fat and sodium). Such tools are used in grocery stores such as “NuVal” at Price Chopper, “Guiding Stars” at Hannaford and “Eat Well Guide” at Shoprite to name a few. However, these tools do not always reflect a particular foods health benefits (such as high in healthy fats or made from whole grains). For more information on these scoring programs check with the store’s dietitian. However, keep in mind the more balanced approach to healthy eating describer below.

“It is what you eat most days” that is important. To focus on one nutrient (such as whole grain) or a component of the food (such as gluten) can overlook its overall nutritional value. And selecting foods based only on nutrients to limit (such as sodium) does not take the good nutrients it may provide into account. Both of these approaches may miss the “big picture” of an overall healthy eating style, which includes a variety of foods from all food groups.

The nutrition facts label, for example, draws our attention to the calories and fat content at the top. To identify nutrient-dense foods we need to read the whole label to check for other nutrients and ingredients to see “what” is in the food such as “whole” grains.

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Here are some tips to start adding more of these “nutrient-dense” foods into your eating plan. By choosing more nutrient-dense foods, you will get more of the beneficial nutrients your body needs without consuming too many calories.

- **Focus on your overall eating pattern**, rather than individual nutrients or specific foods or food groups.
- If you want to lose weight or stop gaining weight, choose more nutrient-dense foods and fewer foods and drinks with primarily “empty calories.”

- Switch to whole-grain crackers and bread.
- Replace some of your sugary drinks with unsweetened tea, coffee or flavored water.
- Instead of a big dollop of sour cream on your chili or baked potato, try plain nonfat Greek yogurt.
- Choose 100% juice with no added sugars, instead of fruit “drinks” or “punch.”
- When adding toppings to pizza or sandwiches, think one more veggie instead of meat or cheese.
- Snack on naturally sweet fruit instead of candy and cookies.

**What About Snacks?**

When we think of regular snack foods and drinks, they are often higher in saturated fat, sodium and added sugars than other foods. For example, sugary drinks (like sodas, sports drinks and sweet tea) are often high in energy density (calories) and low in nutrient density. However, snacking does not have to be bad for you, as long as you choose mostly nutrient-dense foods to snack on.

Become a little pickier about your selections. Look for tasty treats that provide a reasonable amount of calories (200 calories or less for snacks) and that have lots of vitamins, minerals, fiber and antioxidants — ingredients that can help keep your mind sharp, muscles strong and energy levels high.

Here are some snack suggestions that will satisfy the health needs of your body and taste better than many store-bought, high-fat, and overly processed products.

1. **Peanut Butter-Banana Crisp (180 calories)** Crunchy whole-grain crackers are a wholesome snack when topped with a tablespoon of nut butter and half a sliced banana.
   **Nutrition:** A balanced mix of protein, fiber and heart-healthy unsaturated fats, plus potassium to help lower blood pressure from the banana.

2. **Sugar Snap Peas & Cherry Tomatoes With Hummus (157 calories)** Carrot sticks, and raw or lightly steamed fresh sugar snap peas, bell pepper strips, and/or asparagus, about a cup of veggies and 1/4 cup of any flavored hummus.
   **Nutrition:** Lots of nutrients, fiber and antioxidants in the veggies, and a little protein and good fat in the hummus.
3. **Cottage Cheese & Blueberries (163 calories)** Low fat cottage cheese (a good source of protein but high in sodium) about ½ cup and cover it with one cup of blueberries, raspberries, strawberries or blackberries. **Nutrition:** Antioxidants from the berries and good protein from the cottage cheese.

4. **Greek Yogurt, Fruit & Nuts (169 calories)** Zero-fat or low fat plain Greek-style yogurt (about ½ cup) and sweeten it by stirring in one chopped kiwi and a few blackberries (¼ cup). Top with 1 tablespoon of toasted sliced almonds. For more sweetness you can top with a teaspoon of honey, maple syrup or agave nectar (20 calories). **Nutrition:** Plain Greek yogurt has less sugar and twice the protein of sweetened regular yogurts. The kiwi is high in immune-strengthening vitamin C and almonds are rich in vitamin E (an antioxidant).

5. **Apple & Cashew Butter (176 calories)** Slice one medium apple and serve with 1 tablespoon of any nut butter: peanut, sunflower seed, cashew for dipping. **Nutrition:** The apple has cholesterol-lowering soluble fiber and lots of nutrients. The nut butter provides protein and heart-healthy unsaturated fat.

6. **Raisin, Cranberry & Peanut Gorp or Trail Mix (183 calories)** Mix 2 tablespoons of raisins, 1 tablespoon of dried, sweetened cranberries and 2 tablespoons of roasted, salted peanuts into mini plastic snack bags. (Salted nuts are okay here, since amounts are small – about 78 milligrams of sodium, about half as much as a slice of bread.) **Nutrition:** Raisins are rich in potassium, fiber, phenols, tannins and antioxidants which can help lower blood pressure. And then the heart-healthy peanuts.

Here is a basic **Healthy Trail Mix** formula to make about 15 - ¼ cup servings. Depending on your ingredients, calories can add up fast. Nuts and seeds have a lot of calories, but are nutrient dense with healthy fats, protein, and fiber. Candy has a lot of “empty” calories from saturated fats and/or added sugars. Snacks usually range from 100-200 calories. (From University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Educator)

1. **Choose 2 cups of Whole Grains** with low amounts of sugar such as Wheat Chex, Cheerios, or air-popped popcorn.

2. **Add 1/4 cup of Dried Fruit** to help get the recommended fruit in your day. A ¼ cup of dried fruit is equal to a half cup from the Fruit Group. Avoid products with added sugars like sugar or corn syrup.

3. **Include 1/2 cup Protein** to help provide satiety and appetite control like nuts and seeds such as almonds, cashews, pumpkin seeds, or sunflower seeds. Get them unsalted.

4. **Some sweets** Including some sweetness is OK in moderation. Try 1/2 cup of dark chocolate chips that has at least 70% cocoa in order to receive the most health benefits without as much fat and sugar as other chocolates. Or include some candy coated chocolates, but adds more sugar.
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6. Edamame (150 calories) Served in the pod (like peanuts), edamame (boiled green soybeans) have a slightly nutty, sweet flavor. Fill up on 3/4 cup of shelled beans or 1 and 1/2 cups of unshelled pods.
**Nutrition:** This nutrient-dense food provides plenty of protein, fiber and heart-healthy fats.

7. Antipasto Plate (167 calories) Plate a few cubes of feta cheese (1 ounce), 3 small olives of any variety, 10 cherry tomatoes, 4 carrot sticks and some whole grain crackers. Can switch to a lower-salt cheese, such as Swiss or those labeled reduced or low sodium.
**Nutrition:** The veggies provide vitamins A and C, and fiber along with the crackers. The olives provide heart-healthy fat (and unfortunately some sodium).

8. Guacamole & Black Bean Chips (191 calories) Try some of the new types of chips made from black beans and rice. Make some homemade guacamole or a prepared version. Go for 10 chips and 3 tablespoons of guacamole.
**Nutrition:** Avocados are high in heart-healthy monounsaturated fats that helps lower cholesterol and there is more protein and fiber in these chips than regular types of corn or potato chips.

9. Coffee or Latte & 10 Almonds (150 calories) Hot or iced coffee, an antioxidant-rich brew, is good for aging muscles, especially when you add skim or low fat milk and a small handful of nuts such as almonds or walnuts.
**Nutrition:** Milk (or soy milk) provides protein and bone-strengthening calcium and the nuts provide healthy fats, omega 3 fatty acids, protein and fiber.

Resources:
https://healthyforgood.heart.org/eat-smart/articles/how-can-i-eat-more-nutrient-dense-foods
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/20/healthy-snacks_n_1776845.html

Do you have a questions or concerns about what to eat?
If you are participating in services offered by Schenectady County’s Senior and Long Term Care services, you are eligible to have a free consultation with a Registered Dietitian.

Call Cornell Cooperative Extension, Schenectady County at 518-372-1622, ext. 269. Leave a message, if necessary, for dietitian to call you back.

Check out our website for nutrition resources:
http://ccescheneectady.org/nutrition-for-seniors