

Answers to Your Nutrition Questions

American Institute of Cancer

Q: What is a vitamin?

A: A Vitamin is a chemical that our bodies require but cannot produce. Many vitamins serve as catalysts for more than one bodily function. For instance, vitamins help process calories from food, although they do not contain calories themselves. Since our bodies cannot produce vitamins, we need to get them from natural food sources, or from some combination of fortified food or supplements.

Q: Are there really “good fats” and “bad fats?”

A: Yes. Saturated fats found in high-fat meats and whole-milk dairy products raise blood cholesterol and possibly promote cancer development and should be kept to a minimum. Trans fats from hydrogenated shortening used in commercially-baked and deep-fried foods should be avoided. But, monounsaturated fats, found in olives, olive oil, canola oil, nuts and avocados lend flavor to food without raising blood cholesterol or promoting cancer. Omega-3 fats, too, found in fatty fish, flaxseed and some nuts seem to offer protection from heart disease, stroke and possibly some cancers. Our bodies also need small amounts of other polyunsaturated fats like those found in vegetable oils, seeds poultry and seafood. Just remember that all fats are concentrated in calories. Too much of any poses a challenge to weight control.

Q: What do the “% Daily Value” figures on food labels mean?”

A: The Percent Daily Values show the percentage of nutrients in a standard serving. By scanning the figures listed under “% Daily Value” on a food label, you can tell whether food is low, medium or high in those nutrients. If a food contains less than 5 percent of the Daily Value, it contains a negligible amount. If a food contains 20 percent or more of the Daily Value, it's a significant source. To see approximately how much your diet fits within nutrition recommendations, add the Percent Daily Values for an individual nutrient, like fat or vitamin C, in all the foods you eat in a day. Unfortunately, vegetables and fruits, which are full of important nutrients, lack these labels. If your daily calorie needs are those of a typical adult – 2,000 calories, then the total for each nutrient should be about 100 percent. If your calorie needs are significantly higher or lower, your total should be appropriately more or less.

Q: How can I tell what the right portion size is for me?”

A: It's easy to lose perspective on what is a proper portion when excess is all around us. If you suspect that your portions are larger than needed, you might try serving yourself a portion 25 percent smaller than usual. Then, use internal hunger cues to decide if you need more. Studies show that using smaller plates helps us readjust our perceptions. Eating more slowly without distractions like TV can help you appreciate and savor your food long enough so that smaller amounts are satisfying. Just be sure you don't become excessively hungry beforehand or you may overeat when you finally do eat. Also, avoid the practice of rewarding or depriving yourself through portion sizes. Focus instead on how it feels to eat a portion that leaves you satisfied, but not stuffed.

For more information on prolonging good health, along with some delicious, simple recipes, order a free copy of Nutrition After Fifty: Tips and Recipes from the American Institute for Cancer Research at 1-800-843-8114 x10.