



The importance of eating well for carers



Why is eating well important?

Caring for a friend or relative can be hugely rewarding, but at times it can also be tiring and stressful.

Carers often put their own needs last. Amongst the day-to-day challenges of looking after someone else it can be easy to forget about your own health needs.

As a carer, eating a balanced diet is essential to provide your body with all the nutrients it needs. A balanced diet will keep your body strong and give you enough energy to provide the best care for the person you are caring for and yourself.

Eating well does not have to be difficult either. Whether you are underweight or overweight, by understanding how to achieve a balanced diet and how to fit it into your lifestyle, you can manage your weight and stay in good health.

What happens when you do not eat well?

We all know that eating well is important, but when caring for someone it can often be difficult to make sure the body is getting the right nutrition. As a carer, you may find that much of your time and energy will be focused on the needs of the person you care for and, as a result, it may be difficult to prepare and eat healthy balanced meals. You may find that you struggle to eat well for some of the following reasons:

- Caring for someone can often mean a busy and demanding lifestyle, with little time to eat balanced meals. Some people may eat too much of certain types of food, resulting in weight gain, whilst others may not eat enough and therefore lose weight.
- During stressful events, such as recent bereavement, work or financial pressures, you may not feel like eating very much.
- You may also experience appetite loss when suffering from a short-term illness, such as flu, or recovering from an injury because you may feel too sick or weak to prepare and manage normal food.
- If you are on a budget you may find it difficult to buy the foods you need for a healthy, balanced diet.



What are the consequences of not eating well?

Some of the effects of not eating a healthy, balanced diet include:

- **Reduced energy and strength** - Eating fewer calories (energy) and taking in less protein than your body needs can cause tiredness. Caring for someone can be exhausting so it is important you have enough energy to fuel you throughout the day.
- **Weaker immune system** - As the gut makes up an important part of the immune system, a poor nutritional intake may lead to a weaker immune system. A strong immune system is important for fighting illness as the last thing you need when caring for someone is to feel under the weather.
- **Unplanned weight loss** - You may go through periods when you have a poor appetite and don't feel like eating as much, which can be triggered by lots of things. Whatever the reason, taking in fewer calories than the body needs can lead to unintended weight loss.
- **Weight gain** - Busy and demanding lifestyles can make it difficult for you to eat a healthy, balanced diet. When you need a quick energy fix it can be easy to reach for junk food and snacks, which are high in calories and low in nutrients. Whatever the reason, eating too many calories can lead to weight gain. Even if you are overweight, the body may still be lacking in certain nutrients that are important for health.



What is eating well?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for us all. This includes eating foods from all the different food groups.

Sometimes it can be a struggle to eat the right amounts of certain food groups. The **eatwell plate** shows the portions of the different food groups we need to eat each day to have a balanced and healthy diet.

Based on the **eatwell plate** you should try to eat:

- **Plenty of starchy food**

Bread, breakfast cereals, potatoes and pasta are a good source of energy.

Always choose wholegrain varieties where you can.

- **Plenty of fruit and vegetables**

Aim for five portions a day to provide you with a good source of vitamins and minerals. 1 portion is equivalent to: 1 apple, 1 medium banana, 1 handful of grapes, 150ml glass of unsweetened orange juice, dessert bowl of salad.*

- **Some protein**

Meat, fish, eggs, beans.

- **Some milk and dairy foods**

Cheese, yogurt or choose low-fat options if trying to reduce fat in your diet.

- **Limit the amount of foods high in fat or sugar**

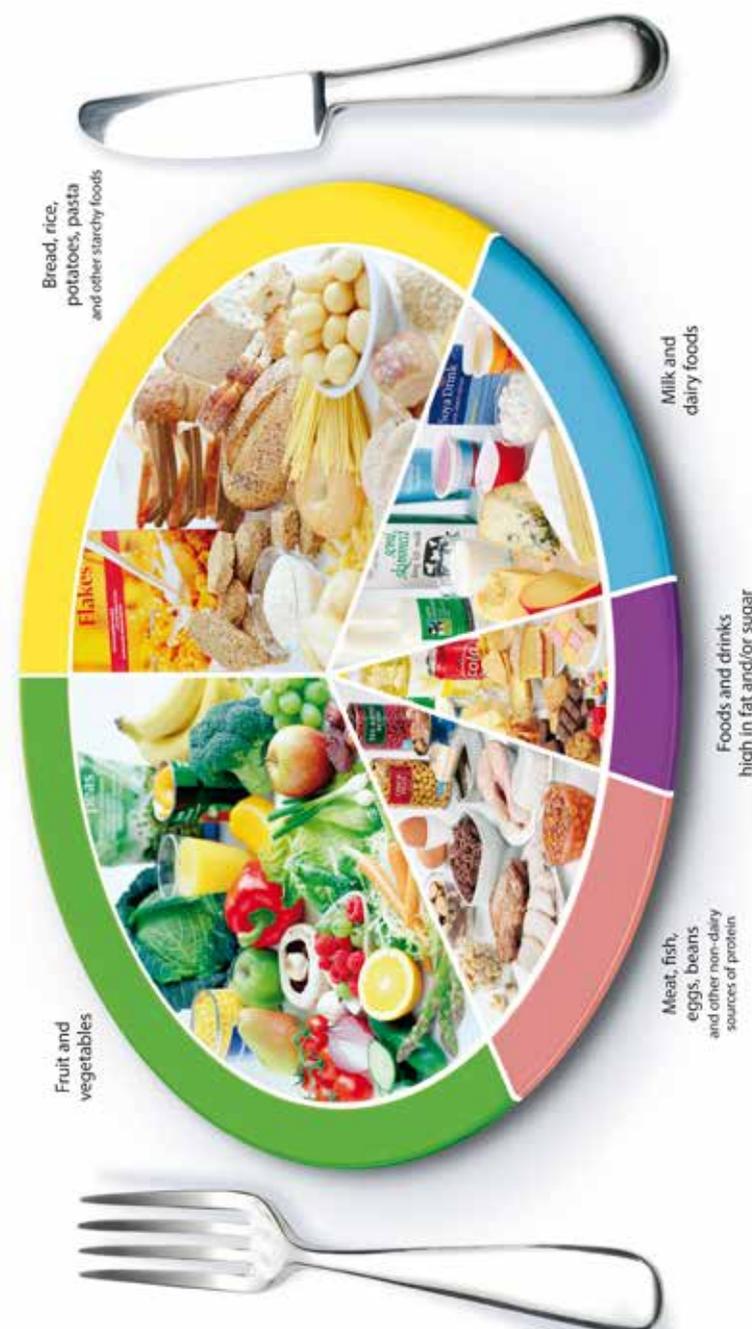
Crisps, chocolate, sweets.

The amount that you need to eat of the different food groups will vary depending on how active you are and if you are trying to lose or gain weight.

*For more information on portion sizes please visit the Carers UK website:
<http://www.carersuk.org.help-and-advice/care-with-nutrition>

The eatwell plate

Use the eatwell plate to help you get the balance right. It shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group.





How can I eat a balanced meal?

There are different ways to eat a balanced diet. Although many of us will choose to have 3 meals a day, if you are struggling to eat enough or simply don't have the time and energy to prepare 3 meals, you may find it easier to eat smaller meals more frequently throughout the day.

Tips for eating well on a budget

If you are on a budget, there are simple and affordable ways to shop for a healthy, balanced diet...

- **Use supermarket own brands** as a cheaper alternative to branded products.
- **Look out for offers on foods that keep**, such as tins of pulses or tomatoes.
- **Dried, frozen or canned fruit (in juice) and vegetables** are cheaper than fresh varieties - and just as healthy.
- **Supermarkets often reduce prices on products that are close to their sell by date** and this can be a great way to pick up a bargain. But be sure you can cook or eat everything you buy (or are able to freeze it) before it goes off.
- **When making meals, prepare large quantities** and freeze the extra portions. This can be a cost and time effective way of maintaining a balanced diet.

With ever increasing shopping bills and caring taking its toll on your finances it is important to make sure you get all the financial help you are entitled to. For free impartial advice call the Carers UK Advice Line on 0808 808 7777.

A typical food diary

These two food diaries illustrate the different ways to eat a balanced diet, depending on whether you are overweight or underweight.

To manage or lose weight...

Food Diary: 3 balanced meals + 2 light snacks

Breakfast: Bowl of porridge made with milk, dried fruit and honey

Snack: 1 apple

Lunch: ½ large tin baked beans and 2 slices of toast

Snack: 1 banana

Dinner: Roast chicken (1 breast or leg) with potatoes (2-3) and mixed vegetables (4 tablespoons)

Dessert: 1 cup of fruit jelly



To gain weight or improve nutritional intake...

Food Diary: 6 snacks/light meals throughout the day

Snack 1: Boiled egg and 1 slice of toast

Snack 2: Small bowl of cereal and 1 banana

Snack 3: Cup of vegetable soup with 1 slice of toast

Snack 4: Nourishing over the counter drink, such as Complan

Snack 5: 1 medium baked potato with tuna mayonnaise and small bowl of salad

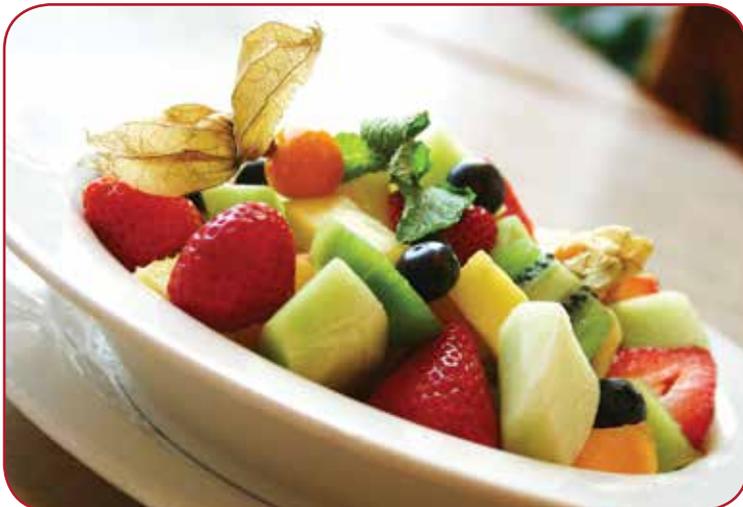
Snack 6: Dessert bowl of rice pudding with stewed fruit



Remember it is also important to drink enough fluid every day (between 6-8 glasses). All drinks count, but water, milk and fruit juices are the healthiest. If you are trying to manage your weight try to avoid sugary soft and fizzy drinks.

Tips for managing or losing weight

- Plan ahead! It can be easy to fall back on junk food or quick takeaways so plan meals in advance. This way you will have all the ingredients you need to prepare a balanced meal.
- Eat everything in moderation. There is no need to cut out any food group, as long as you control portions. For example, you can have smaller portions by using a small plate.
- Replace high fat and sugary foods with starchy options, which provide plenty of energy to fuel you through the day.
- Snack on high fibre foods, which can keep you feeling fuller for longer. Nuts, fruit and vegetables are high in fibre and make nutritious snacks.
- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables. Dried, frozen or canned fruit (in juice) are just as healthy as, and cheaper than, fresh varieties.
- As a carer it can be difficult to get enough exercise. Always try to walk when possible, take the stairs instead of escalators and consider a video workout class if you are indoors a lot.



Tips for gaining weight or improving nutritional intake



If you are struggling to eat a balanced diet or have simply gone off your food, here are some practical tips to help improve nutritional intake:

- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Increase intake of foods that are high in calories and protein, for example: meat, fish, eggs, full fat dairy products (like yogurt and cheese).
- When on the go, eat snacks like nuts, crackers and cereal bars, which provide plenty of energy.
- Consume nourishing drinks based on milk, such as Complan, to increase energy and protein intake. These are also available as 'ready to drink' options, which are convenient when you are at home or out and about.

What happens when food is not enough?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet plays a key role in keeping the body strong. But illness, old age and stress can put a strain on the body. It can be hard to get enough food at these times, which can weaken the body further.

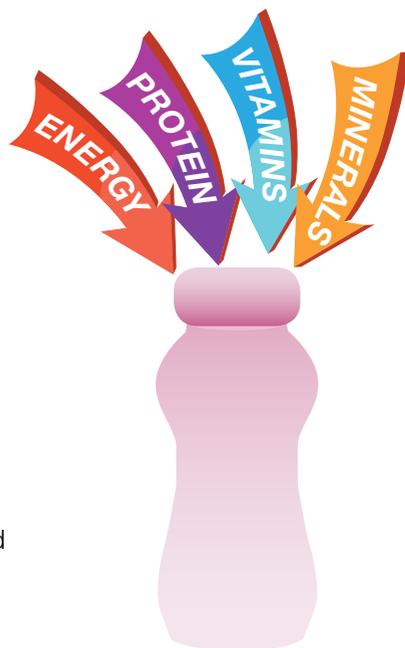
What is medical nutrition?

Medical nutrition has been specifically designed for those who find it difficult to get adequate nutrition from a normal diet alone. Medical nutrition is a scientifically formulated liquid food that is available in the form of a drink containing energy, protein, vitamins and minerals. It is particularly helpful for those living with a medical condition, recovering from an illness or operation, or those who have become weak and frail over time.

Speak to your GP

If you are worried that you are struggling with a normal diet, the practical tips within this leaflet can help improve your nutritional intake with food. You could also ask your pharmacist whether an over the counter product in a powdered format, such as Complan, is a suitable option alongside normal foods and drinks. However, should you continue to struggle, please speak to your GP or other healthcare professional about your concerns and whether medical nutrition is right for you.

Further information can be found at www.carersuk.org or by calling the Nutricia helpline on 0845 250 1011.



About Carers UK

Carers UK is here to improve carers' lives. Most of us will look after an elderly relative, a sick partner or a disabled family member. Caring is part of life but without the right support the personal costs of caring can be high. When caring affects your family, Carers UK is here for you to provide the support and advice you need.

Carers UK supports carers and provides information and advice about caring. It influences policy through research based on carers' real life experiences, and campaigns for the changes that make a real difference for carers.

Carers UK is working in partnership with Nutricia to help improve understanding about nutrition and caring. The partnership provides carers with information and resources on nutritional care for both themselves and the person they care for.

About Nutricia

Nutricia specialises in the delivery of advanced medical nutrition for the very young, the old and the sick.

We supply high quality feeds, systems and support services to patients and healthcare professionals. Through our Nutricia Homeward service we deliver feeds, enteral feeding systems and nursing care direct to patient's homes.

Carers UK and Nutricia

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The information in this leaflet is for guidance only and is not an authoritative statement of the law. The information is correct as of June 2013.