

Healthy Eating: Dinner Ideas



What makes a healthy meal?

If your plate includes lots of colorful vegetables, you're off to a good start. Include a type of whole grain, such as brown rice, whole wheat bread, or a corn tortilla. For protein, think lean. Good choices are grilled chicken, fish, or pork, or beans or tofu. For cooking, use healthy fats, such as olive or canola oil. Flavor your foods with herbs, lemon, and little salt.

Can healthy also be fast?

If you keep your kitchen stocked with healthy basics, you can pull together a quick dinner if you're pressed for time. Here are a few ideas for foods to keep on hand:

- Frozen chicken breasts and fish fillets, without breading
- Frozen vegetables
- Frozen and canned fruits
- Canned beans, such as pinto beans, white beans, and black beans
- Low-sodium vegetable or chicken broth
- Tomato sauce and pasta sauce

- Whole-grain pasta and brown rice
- Onions and garlic

Let the grocery store do some of the work for you. Look for precut, washed, ready-to-eat foods such as:

- Packaged fresh vegetables, such as baby carrots, salad mixes, and chopped broccoli and cauliflower. These are great for making quick salads, soups, casseroles, and stir-fries.
- Packaged, presliced fresh fruits, such as melon or pineapple. You can add these to a container of low-fat yogurt to make an easy fruit salad.
- Precut, trimmed meat. Trimmed meat has less fat. And meat that has already been cut into strips or cubes cuts down on your preparation time.
- Precooked chicken. Many grocery stores sell roast chicken in the deli section. You can chop or shred the cooked chicken and use it as a filling in burritos, soups, and casseroles.

Make "almost homemade" dinners. Start with one or two prepared ingredients and then add your own fresh ingredients. Try the following ideas:

- **Pizza.** A premade pizza crust and a jar of pizza sauce can be the start of a healthy pizza. Just add plenty of fresh vegetables and a sprinkle of low-fat mozzarella.
- **Vegetable soup.** Make quick vegetable soup by combining canned chicken broth, frozen vegetables, and some uncooked rice or pasta.
- **Asian chicken salad.** Combine grilled chicken breast slices with a bag of prewashed lettuce, canned mandarin orange slices, and slivered almonds to make an easy Asian chicken salad. A store-bought ginger-soy vinaigrette can complete the salad.

- **Fish tacos.** Use frozen fish fillets, such as cod, and bagged shredded cabbage to make easy fish tacos. Place the cooked fish and the cabbage in corn tortillas. Top with salsa, lime juice, and low-fat sour cream.
- **Stir-fry.** Use precut vegetables, precut and trimmed meat, and canned pineapple chunks to make a quick and flavorful dinner. Serve with steamed rice.

What if you go out to eat?

You can find healthy foods at most restaurants, including some fast-food places.

Before you order, find out how the food is prepared. Foods that are grilled, baked, or steamed tend to be lower in fat than foods that are fried. Ask to have butter, sour cream, gravy, and sauces served on the side. This will allow you to control how much you use.

- Try not to arrive at the restaurant overly hungry. It's harder to make healthy food choices when you get too hungry. Have a small snack 2 or 3 hours before you go out to eat.
- Ask your server to bring a box with your meal, so that you can split the meal before you even take the first bite. Or split a meal with someone else at your table.

- Choose menu items that contain fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Order extra vegetables on pizzas and sandwiches.
- Try vegetarian dishes. Ethnic restaurants, such as Indian, Thai, or Japanese restaurants, often have a wide variety of vegetarian choices.
- Look for restaurants that have heart-healthy items marked on their menus, and choose those whenever you can.
- Avoid all-you-can-eat menu options and buffet-style restaurants. Unlimited refills of soup or pasta may sound like a good deal, but they can make it easier to overeat.

When you choose fast food

Most fast-food restaurants have nutrition information available on the Internet and in the restaurants. Use the information to choose items that are lower in fat, calories, and salt.

Look for restaurants that let you order a side salad and milk or water instead of french fries and a soft drink with meals.

At fast-food restaurants, choose the smallest-size meal option instead of "super-sizing."