

Health Promotion / Wellness / Psychosocial

Healthy Eating at Work

On this page

[Why should a workplace be concerned about healthy eating?](#)

[How do you start a "healthy eating" program?](#)

[What should a healthy eating program focus on?](#)

[What are sample topics for a workplace healthy eating program?](#)

[Does the workplace influence how people eat?](#)

[How do I know what food is healthy?](#)

[What are some tips for snacks to keep at work?](#)

[How can meetings and other work functions help workers gain healthy eating habits?](#)

[Do some jobs have specific nutrition concerns?](#)

[Should a workplace offer salt and fluid supplements when individuals are working in hot environments?](#)

[What are some healthy eating tips for shift workers?](#)

Why should a workplace be concerned about healthy eating?

When a workplace helps workers make wise food choices as part of a workplace health program, it can positively influence a person's long-term health and wellness.

Healthy eating, [active living](#), and a positive outlook can lead to:

- Reduced risk of heart disease, some forms of cancer, and other chronic illnesses.
 - Elevated mood, energy, and self-esteem.
 - Reduced anxiety and stress.
 - A strong immune system.
 - Improved brain function and productivity.
 - Opportunities to spend an enjoyable time with family and friends.
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How do you start a "healthy eating" program?

While it is essential for an employer to provide a safe and healthy workplace, it is also important to encourage healthy lifestyles among their workers. Healthy eating programs can be an important step. These programs can bring lots of people together to learn how to improve their health both at work and at home. As always, these programs should be part of a complete workplace health program and should not take resources or attention away from workplace hazards that may be present.

Before you start:

No matter how much you plan or make people aware, healthy eating programs are voluntary – not everyone will join or be interested. Survey workers to help you decide what types and levels of programs to offer.

When planning a health program, be sure you know the interests of your audience. In this case:

- Know why people are interested in a healthy eating program. Are participants looking for general nutrition information, or more specific programs such as heart health?
- Be sure to consider what types of programs have been offered in the past. Which programs worked? Which did not?
- Know exactly who your target audience is.
- Plan when the program will be offered (seasonal, or all year).
- Identify who people can go to if they have individual questions or want more help.

What should a healthy eating program focus on?

Workplaces that are going to start a healthy eating program should focus on the main messages from Canada's Food Guide. They should also make sure that wherever their employees get their food – whether it's vending machines, canteens, or cafeterias – there should be some healthy food choices.

[Canada's Food Guide](#) suggests the following for healthy food choices:

- Eat plenty of vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods, and protein foods. Choose protein foods that come from plants more often.
- Choose foods with healthy fats instead of saturated fat.
- Limit highly processed foods. If you choose these foods, eat them less often and in small amounts.
- Prepare meals and snacks using ingredients that have little to no added sodium, sugars, or saturated fat.

- Choose healthier menu options when eating out.
- Make water your drink of choice.
- Use food labels.

Canada's Food Guide also encourages people to examine their eating habits because healthy eating is also about where, when, why, and how we eat. Healthy eating habits include:

- Be mindful of your eating habits, including taking time to eat and noticing when you are hungry and when you are full.
- Cook more often – plan what you will eat, and involve others in planning and preparing meals.
- Enjoy your food, and include your culture and food traditions.
- Eat meals with others, when possible.

What are sample topics for a workplace healthy eating program?

When offering nutrition information at the workplace, be sure to offer a wide range of options. Topics for programs may include:

- Understanding the basics.
- Weight management and body image.
- Fad diets.
- How to eat more vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods, and protein foods.
- Learn what protein foods come from plants.
- Tips to reduce sodium (salt), sugars, and saturated fats.
- Planning balanced meals for the whole family.
- Making smart choices while grocery shopping and reading food labels.
- Programs for specific health conditions (such as diabetes, heart conditions, etc.).
- Healthy eating when away from home, including how to identify healthy choices when dining at restaurants.

Some more specific options for a workplace healthy eating program are:

- Offer material for workers to take home to help them make healthier choices when planning meals. For example:
 - Provide a sample shopping list and a plan for the week's meals you can make from that list.
 - Have handouts of Canada's Food Guide.
- Provide information on making healthier food choices when shopping, ordering in restaurants, and in other similar situations.
- Teach people how to read and understand food labels.
- Provide cooking tips for making healthy foods.
- Post a list of local restaurants that offer balanced food menus, dietary options, and dietary information such as calories per portion.
- Invite a speaker to conduct an information session.
- Have "theme" weeks or months.
- Stock vending machines with healthier options.
- Arrange for the on-site cafeteria to offer a range of healthy food choices.
- Have a refrigerator and microwave at work so people can bring healthy lunches from home.
- When lunches or drinks are provided at meetings, be sure to provide healthy choices.
- Arrange for a group to go to a weight management program together, or have the program come to your office at a convenient time (a survey before taking this step would be useful in finding out if there is interest).
- Give people a way to share healthy recipes with each other by using an Intranet, e-mail, or posters.
- Provide information about how to use healthy ingredients in popular recipes.
- Organize a potluck lunch at work featuring healthy food choices. Try a multicultural day.

Does the workplace influence how people eat?

It can. Always remember that the workplace environment could influence the health of its workers. For example, workers could choose to have a healthy home-cooked meal if a healthy eating program provides for lunch storage and a clean lunchroom with adequate seating. A safe and clean eating area is a requirement under most occupational health and safety laws. Beyond this, it is important to look at what is offered at vending machines and staff cafeterias. If you don't look at the larger picture to see how the workplace itself influences the eating patterns of the workers, the program may not work as well as it could.

Be sure the workplace supports healthy eating programs by providing time for workers to go to information sessions, offering appropriate foods in the cafeteria and vending machines, and by providing refrigerators and microwaves so that meals can be stored and prepared appropriately.

How do I know what food is healthy?

It is a good idea to use reliable sources of information when researching food, such as Health Canada's:

- [Canadian Nutrient File \(CNF\) - Search by food](#)
- [Nutrition Labelling](#)

You can learn about the food you eat through its nutritional information. In packaged food, you can find this information in the nutrition facts on the label. Food from restaurants or when you cook at home does not come with a label, but you can still find nutritional information from sources such as the Canadian Nutrient File.

Healthy food indicators to look out for:

- Fibre: more fibre (soluble and insoluble) is generally better.
- Carbohydrates (sugar or carbs): High carbs could negatively affect health, especially if you are not active. Complex carbs are generally preferred over simple carbs since they have a less dramatic effect on blood sugar levels.
- Glycemic index: the lower the glycemic index, the less it affects your blood sugar levels. Foods with a high glycemic index could cause your blood sugar to spike, which is not always ideal (but could be useful in some situations, such as restoring glycogen stores).
- Fats: monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats can be beneficial, while saturated fats and especially trans fats are considered unhealthy.
- Protein: not all foods need to provide high protein, but the presence of protein is generally a good indicator.
- Calories: the body has a limit to how many calories it needs daily. This number can vary depending on the individual. Calorie-dense foods could lead to weight gain.
- Sodium (salt): excessive sodium can have negative health impacts, such as high blood pressure.
- Vitamins and minerals: Foods rich in vitamins and minerals are generally beneficial when consumed in reasonable amounts.
- Satiety: foods that are more filling keep you satisfied for longer, compared to low satiety foods, which result in feelings of hunger shortly after eating and, potentially, overeating.

A healthy diet consists of the right balance of foods with healthy food indicators. Too much or too little of the above indicators may not be ideal. The guidance in this section is meant to be informative and encourage you to learn more. Please note that this is not intended as dietary advice. Speak with a dietitian or your family doctor before making major dietary changes.

What are some tips for snacks to keep at work?

Store in your desk or locker	Store in the fridge	On the Road
• Whole grain crackers • Steel-cut or rolled oats (oatmeal) • Nut butter, such as peanut or almond butter • Canned fish • Canned soups • Unsalted nuts and seeds, such as almonds or cashews	• Whole grain bagels / bread • Low-fat and low-sugar yoghurt • Cottage cheese • Fresh fruit • Raw vegetables • Low-fat cheese • Salad greens	• Carrots • Celery sticks • Apples • Whole grain crackers • Unsalted nuts and seeds

How can meetings and other work functions help workers gain healthy eating habits?

Situation	Try to Limit	Try Instead
Meetings	• Donuts • Muffins • Cookies • Cream and sugar • Pizza • Pop or soda	• Whole grain breads or crackers • Individual low-fat and low-sugar yoghurt • Fresh fruit • Veggie cups • Water
Vending machines / Catering Trucks	• Danish • Chocolate bars • French fries • Pop or soda • Chips	• Water • Sandwiches made from whole grain bread and non-processed meats • Soup • Fruit • Low-fat and low-sugar yoghurt • Whole grain crackers
Hectic Schedule / Long Hours / On the road	• Chips • Cookies • Coffee with cream • Hot dogs • Pizza • Fried foods • Burgers or sandwiches with lots of condiments • Salads loaded with dressing	• Fruit • Whole grain breads or crackers • Vegetables • Salads with low-fat and low-sugar dressing • Non-processed meats • Water

Do some jobs have specific nutrition concerns?

In most cases, no. Most jobs today do not require the worker to eat any additional calories to compensate for physical activity at work. The exception may be very physical work, such as people who lift or carry heavy loads most of the day, such as shovelling, sawing trees by hand, farm work, etc. If you have concerns about meeting your nutritional needs, ask a dietitian or your family doctor for advice.

Should a workplace offer salt and fluid supplements when individuals are working in hot environments?

A person working at a high pace or in a very hot environment loses water and salt through sweat. On average, about one litre of water each hour may be required to replace the fluid loss. Plenty of cool (10-15°C) drinking water should be available on the job site, and workers should be encouraged to drink one cup (8 oz or around 250 ml) of water every 15 to 20 minutes, even if they do not feel thirsty.

Many people drink sports drinks, fruit juice, etc. Drinks specially designed to replace body fluids and electrolytes may be taken, but for most people, they should be used in moderation, and water should still be consumed. The electrolyte drinks may be of benefit for workers who have very physically active occupations, but keep in mind that they may add unnecessary sugar or salt to your diet. Drinks with alcohol or caffeine should never be taken, as they dehydrate the body. For most people, water is the most efficient fluid for rehydration.

A worker used to, or acclimatized to, lifting heavy loads or working in the heat sweats more "efficiently" – they sweat sooner and sweat more, but they lose less salt in their sweat than persons who are not used to such work. For this reason, the salt in a normal diet is usually enough to maintain the electrolyte balance and keep the body working well. Generally speaking, people will consume enough salt through their regular diet, so adding more salt when performing heavy tasks is not usually necessary. The use of salt tablets is not generally recommended because the salt does not enter the body system as fast as water. Too much salt can inhibit the body's ability to sweat and cool down, and can also make someone feel thirsty. Workers who have questions about their salt intake should talk to their doctor about how much salt they need to match their job and dietary needs.

What are some healthy eating tips for shift workers?

The body has a natural 24-hour cycle, known as its circadian rhythm. By responding to environmental light, the circadian rhythm regulates sleepiness, alertness, and digestion. [Shiftwork](#) can change the normal exposure to light, causing disruption of the normal rhythm and resulting in a number of effects, such as digestive issues. The effects may be especially felt when shifts are not consistent (that is, not allowing the body time to adjust).

Consider the following healthy eating tips:

- Aim for 3 main meals at around the same time every day. Avoid eating between midnight and 6 a.m., where possible.
- Eat high-quality foods like vegetables, nuts, eggs, fish, poultry, and whole grains.
- Eat a small meal after your shift and before sleeping to avoid waking from hunger.
- Reduce the amount of processed and red meat.
- Stay hydrated with water.
- Minimize alcohol and caffeine consumption.
- Pay attention to calorie intake and balance it with physical activity.
- Supplement vitamins and minerals if you might not be getting enough naturally (such as vitamin D).
- Avoid foods that are high in simple carbohydrates and low in fibre.

Meal prepping can help you stick to a healthy diet and eat on time.

Always consult with a dietitian or your family doctor before making major dietary changes.

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