

Keys to a Balanced Meal

The breakdown of fat, protein, carbohydrates and fiber at each meal is less important than maintaining a long-term, balanced diet. While each meal should have some amount of each of these nutrients, the amounts you consume at each meal will vary, so think about creating a weekly, monthly or even yearly diet that follows USDA guidelines for nutrient balance and health. Daily caloric needs vary according to age, gender and activity level; most dietary recommendations are based on a 2,000 to 2,200 calorie diet for women and a 2,500 to 2,900 calorie diet for men.

Protein

Protein is one nutrient that most Americans get more than enough of. Protein is available in animal and plant form; both forms can deliver all the required essential amino acids when eaten as part of a balanced and varied diet. You should get 10 to 35 percent of your daily calories from protein; recommendations suggest adult women eat 46 grams per day, while men eat about 56 g. Each meal, if you have three per day, should have between 15 and 18 g of protein. One 3-oz. serving of meat has about 21 g of protein, one cup of dry beans has about 16 g and one cup of milk contains 8 g.

Fat

Fat gets plenty of bad press, but it is an essential nutrient that plays vital roles in protecting internal organs, storing and releasing energy, assisting brain function and metabolizing fat-soluble vitamins. As with protein, most Americans get more than enough fat in their diets. For a 2,000 calorie diet, aim to get 65 g of fat per day; a 2,500 calorie diet can allow up to 83 g. Each meal should have between 21 and 27 g of fat. Monounsaturated fats, found in nuts, avocados and chicken, and omega-3 and -6 fats, found in seafood and flax seeds, are good sources of fats. Avoid trans fats and large amounts of saturated fats.

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates, once broken down and absorbed by the digestive system, are a primary source of energy. Approximately 55 to 60 percent of your daily caloric intake should come from carbohydrates; at least half of that should be complex carbohydrates, like those found in whole grains. A 2,000 calorie per day diet should contain 275 to 300 g of carbohydrates, or about 100 g per meal, according to USDA guidelines. Complex carbohydrates cause less sharp a rise in blood sugar than do most simple sugars, and you digest them more slowly, helping you feel full longer. The American Heart Association recommends limiting added sugars -- that is, simple carbohydrates that don't occur naturally in food items -- to 100 calories, or six tsp., per day for women, and 150 calories, or nine tsp., for men. This limit includes both table sugar and high-fructose corn syrup.

Fiber

Unlike protein and fat, most Americans don't get enough fiber each day. Fiber, which is an indigestible carbohydrate essential for digestive health, can be found in whole grains. The two types of fiber, insoluble and soluble, provide numerous health benefits. Insoluble fiber helps move waste through your digestive system and maintain bowel health, while soluble fiber can help lower cholesterol and glucose levels. Men ages 50 and younger should consume 38 g per day; men over 50 should get 30 g. Women under 50 need 25 g, while women over 50 should aim for 21 g per day. In a three-meal-per-day plan, each meal should contain between 7 and 13 g of fiber. Good sources of fiber include beans, legumes, nuts, and whole fruits, vegetables and grains. Refined foods, including processed and canned fruits and vegetables and baked goods made from white flours, tend to be poor sources of dietary fiber.