

Keeping a Food Diary

What is a food diary?

A food diary is a record of the food you eat each day. It can help you and your healthcare provider check your diet. The diary can show your eating patterns, how much nutrition you are getting, and possible food allergy symptoms. You can also track how many calories you eat every day.

Why should I keep a food diary?

A food diary is an important tool for finding problem foods if you have a food allergy, food intolerance, or digestive problem, such as reflux or irritable bowel syndrome.

If you are trying to lose weight, a food diary can be used to create a meal plan that focuses on your problem areas. The information about your diet and eating habits can help you create a realistic meal plan for gradual and healthy weight loss. A food diary can show when you overeat or eat too much fat or sugar. It can show if you don't eat enough fruits and vegetables or don't drink enough water. It can also help you to keep healthy eating habits when you reach your weight-loss goals. People who lose weight and keep it off often are those who keep food diaries even after they reach their weight goals.

What information should I include in a food diary?

Whether you are using your food diary to identify food allergy or intolerance or as a tool to help you lose weight and eat better, don't change your eating habits for the first few days. Evaluating your current diet is the only way to recognize changes that should be made. Write down everything you eat. Be honest and thorough.

To find foods that may be causing allergic or digestive symptoms, record the following information:

- All the foods that you eat (be specific about the food and any added toppings, such as cheese, mayonnaise, and sauces)
- How much (portion sizes) of each food
- The times of day when you eat
- Any symptoms you have after eating a food, such as allergy symptoms or digestive problems
- The time symptoms started and how long they lasted.

If you are using the food diary to improve your diet and help you lose weight, include the following:

- All the foods that you eat (be specific about the food and any added toppings, such as cheese, mayonnaise, and sauces)
- How much (portion sizes) of each food
- The times of day when you eat

- Where you eat your food
- Who you eat with
- What you are doing while you eat, such as watching TV
- Your thoughts and feelings at the time you were eating.

Include information about your thoughts or mood when you eat. Hunger may not be the only reason for eating. For example, sometimes you may eat because you are bored, stressed, or depressed. Once you are aware of your eating triggers and patterns, it can be easy to see what may need to change. For instance, if stress is a trigger for overeating, exercise can be a healthier way to deal with the stress.

Keep your food diary with you throughout the day and try to write down foods as you eat them. If you wait until late in the day, you will be more likely to forget some items or underestimate portion size.

You can get computer and cell phone applications that make it even easier to keep track of what you're eating.

How do I know what a portion size is?

For portion sizes, use measurements such as inches, cups, and ounces for the amounts of foods that you eat. For example, you might record that you ate a 2 x 2 inch piece of cornbread, 1 cup of oatmeal, a 12-oz soda, or a 3-ounce chicken patty.

Here are some simple ways to measure portion sizes:

- 1 cup of starchy food, such as mashed potatoes or pasta, is about as big as a closed fist and counts for 2 starch servings.
- 1 serving of a fresh round fruit is about the size of a tennis ball.
- Three ounces (oz) of cooked meat is the size of a deck of cards.
- 1 ounce of cheese is about the size of your thumb.
- 1 teaspoon of margarine or mayonnaise is the size of the tip of your thumb.

Standard portion sizes have been developed by the American Diabetes Association and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Portion size information and interactive tools to plan meals are also available at <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>. Sometimes the portion sizes on the lists developed by these different organizations differ slightly. If you are diabetic, it is easier to use the Diabetic Food Lists. You can also use food labels to learn typical serving sizes, the amounts of calories in each serving, and other nutrient content.

Is there a simpler version of the diary that will help with weight loss?

If you are trying to lose weight, at first you need to be specific about the types and amounts of every food, and you need to record this information every time you eat. After you have mastered measuring portions of food, you may be able to use a quicker method, as follows:

1. List your daily goal for the numbers of servings that you want to include in your diet for each food group. Your goal should be based on what you have learned from keeping the more detailed food diary.

For example: If your goal is 1,500 calories per day, a healthy balance would include 7 servings from the starch food group, 3 to 4 servings of fruit, 2 servings of low-fat or skim milk or yogurt, two 3-ounce servings from the meat group, and 4 servings from the fat group. You can eat as many vegetables as you like, but you may want to have a goal of eating at least a certain number of vegetables every day.

2. Every time you eat, note with a star or checkmark each serving you have from one of the food groups.

This quick and easy food diary might look something like this after you eat breakfast:

Daily Goal	Number of servings
7 starches	* * *
3 to 4 fruits	*
2 milks	*
2 meats	
4 fats	*
vegetables	

Each star in the table stands for 1 serving of a food. For example, the table shows a meal of 1 cup of cereal (2 portions of starch), 1 slice of toast (1 starch) with 1 tablespoon of light margarine (1 fat), one half of a banana (1 fruit), and 1 cup of skim milk (1 milk).

Use a small notebook, starting with a new page every day. Keep it with you at all times and make an entry each time you eat something. Except for nonstarchy vegetables, try not to eat more than your goal for each food group.

How can I get more information?

For more information about food groups and portion sizes, see the following Web sites:

- <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>
- http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/just_enough.htm
- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/diabetes-diet/DA00077>

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This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

Food Symptom Diary

Date	Food or Drink	How much	Time	Symptom	Time Symptoms Started & Stopped
10/24	<small>Example:</small> <i>Milkshake</i>	<i>8 oz cup</i>	<i>2 PM</i>	<i>bloating and cramping</i>	<i>3 PM to 5 PM</i>

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