Nutrition and recovery

Good nutrition plays an important role in recovery and building health. Why take care of yourself nutritionally? People in recovery have, and may always have, special nutritional needs. Living with addiction can cause physical harm to the body, which can sometimes have permanent effects. With proper support, the body can recover and be well again. Nutritionists believe that food is medicine and it has the power to heal one meal at a time.

Key nutrients: A place to start

- Key nutrients
- Where to find them

Key nutrients

Vitamins A, C, and E, B vitamins, and Omega-3 fatty acids

These vitamins play an important role in our immune and nervous systems by helping us cope with stress and maintain our energy levels.

- **Vitamins A, C and E** help lower harmful substances in our bodies called free radicals. Free radicals cause damage, illness and aging in our bodies.
- **B-vitamins** increase energy by helping you use the carbohydrates, protein and fat that you eat. B-vitamins can also help the brain function and rebuild neurotransmitters (that send signals all over the brain).
- **Omega-3 fatty acids** are essential fats we need to eat. Research has shown that they can help reduce heart disease and improve conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure. In addition, Omega-3 fatty acids help the brain use the hormone serotonin and may improve mood fluctuations.

Where to find them

Where to find key nutrients

- **Vitamin A:** Dark green, leafy vegetables (spinach/dark lettuce/ kale) or orange fruits and vegetables like sweet potatoes, carrots, and melon.
- **Vitamin C:** Citrus fruits, bell peppers, strawberries and 100% fruit juice are important for the skin, especially in our mouth and gums!
- **Vitamin E:** Sunflower oil/seeds, almonds, peanuts, hazelnuts, green vegetables like spinach, avocado and soybean oil (in many foods like salad dressing, but take care not to overuse
- **B-Vitamins**: Meat, fish, poultry, whole grains, leafy, green vegetables, nuts and seeds, and some dairy products.
- **Omega-3 Fatty Acids:** Most seafood (salmon, tuna, sardines), walnuts, chia or ground flax seeds, leafy vegetables, grass-fed meat, plant oils and dietary supplements (like fish oil).

Not every meal needs to be perfect. You can eat these foods over the course of a week – be flexible and do the best you can. A combination of foods, over time, can provide you with the nutrition you need.

Simple recipes are the key: Mixed dishes help cover your bases



Making a stir-fry with chicken, spinach and red peppers, cooked in a little bit of sunflower oil or topped with nuts will fulfill many food groups. Add a little brown rice or wild rice on the side for fiber and energy, and you have a nutritious, recovery friendly meal.

Make use of foods from the local food pantry: If you pick up or receive canned tuna, broccoli and whole grain bread, mix tuna with a little mayo (often made with soybean or olive oil for a little vitamin E), scoop onto bread and have raw or steamed broccoli on the side. Don't forget snacks (usually 1-3 items). Strawberries, yogurt and almonds, for example, can cover a lot of nutrition in just one serving.

Eat smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day



Being in recovery, treatment court or therapy often means a busy schedule. Sometimes, it can be tough to keep up with it all, but nutrition can help. Eating regularly during the day helps stabilize blood sugar levels and provides energy to think and do tasks. Recommendations for people in recovery are to eat about every 3-4 hours (for example, eating an omelet at 8 a.m. followed by an apple and yogurt at 11 a.m.)

A well-balanced breakfast boosts metabolism and mental and physical energy while decreasing the risk of late-day/evening snacking. It is also important to include a source of protein at every meal and snack. This maintains a normal level of fullness and helps to stabilize mood. Protein is found in nuts/seeds, eggs, dairy, meat, soy, beans, legumes, vegetables and some grains.

Increase whole foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains



Whole foods, like fruit, provide nutrients and "brain food" that can support the recovery process. Snack foods, like chips, tend to be low in vitamins and higher in energy (calories). We eat bigger portions in order to feel satisfied, which gives our body more energy than we really need. This extra energy might cause unwanted weight gain. By adding some whole foods each day, you'll strike a balance White grain, processed foods with the energy you eat.

White flour, found in foods like white bread, is a processed food, not a whole food. Removing the brown shell (or the bran) from the wheat kernel removes about 70% of vitamins and minerals and very few are added back after processing. 100% whole wheat flour, on the other hand, keeps all of its vitamins and minerals.

Nutritious eating and doing the best you can in recovery

Watch a short video and download a handout for **Nutritious eating and doing the best you can in recovery** (PDF).

Expand all

+
Nutrition resources

Nutrition in recovery: A guide for professionals supporting people with SUD's (PDF) — Providers can find specific nutrition recommendations for people recovering from different types of substance use disorder.

Mood and brain-supporting micronutrients (PDF; SAMHSA)— Learn how micronutrients help the brain function and which foods contain these important vitamins and nutrients.

Food for thought: Revitalizing Indigenous knowledge about healthy eating (2019; UW Medicine) — Indigenous foods and cooking practices have extensive nutritional benefits. Find out how a traditional diet helps the body and try recipes for quinoa salad and pemmican.

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