



## Healthy Food Choices

### Defining "Diet"

Simply put, our "diet" is what we eat and drink. We often use the word to describe an eating plan for weight loss, but it has a much broader meaning than that. Everyone, then, is actually on a diet. Most of us don't really have an official diet plan. We tend to just make our food and beverage choices based on our priorities at the time we make them.

### Determinants of Dietary Choices

Habit is a major factor in determining what we consume. Examples of other factors that influence our food choices include convenience, economy, availability, personal preference, personal beliefs, cultural background, and emotional comfort. Obviously, the nutritional value of a food is only one of many possible reasons why you might choose to eat it.

If you do make nutritional value a priority for your food choices, there are still many nutritional characteristics that make up the whole nutritional value picture. You may focus on calories, fat, type of fat, carbohydrate, protein, fiber, vitamins, minerals, and/or various phytochemicals (non-nutrient chemicals found in plants) that play a role in our health. The more you think about it, the more complicated it may seem. One guideline that helps to simplify choices somewhat is to try to choose foods that are as close to their whole, natural form as possible. The more processed a food is, the more likely it is to be missing some of its original nutrients and to have had calories added in the form of sugars and fats. On the other hand, it's also important to know that not all types of processing decrease nutritional value, and some nutrients are not easily depleted by processing. Sometimes it might be actually be beneficial to remove a component from a whole food, as when some fat is removed from whole milk to make skim or low fat milk.

Ideally, it's best if we can integrate nutritional factors into all the other factors that influence our dietary choices. We will be most likely to make healthy choices on a regular basis if those choices also fit in with our other priorities, such as personal preference, convenience, and economy. For example, many fresh fruits are very convenient. When purchased in season, they are also relatively economical.