**A woman’s guide to good nutrition through the decades**

You may have heard the saying, “Teach a woman, teach a nation.” There’s truth to this, especially when it comes to good nutrition, says Head of Vitality’s nutrition strategy, Candice Smith.

“Worldwide, women generally take on the responsibility of meal preparation. This means that equipping women with knowledge and skills in healthy eating can have a hugely positive ripple effect in terms of health outcomes for families, communities and society in general.”

Here are some pointers from Vitality on the best ways for women to pack in nutrients for a healthy body and mind.

**In your 20s**

* Now’s the time to foster healthy eating habits for life. Look up a serving-size comparison chart online to learn about portion control and remember that breakfast-eaters are more likely to meet their daily nutrient requirements and maintain a healthy weight.
* You can still increase your bone density up till your mid-20s, so get in three cups of calcium-rich dairy each day. For example, blend fresh fruit and plain yoghurt together for a [daily smoothie](https://www.discovery.co.za/portal/individual/breakfast-smoothies); cook your oats in milk; mix plain cottage cheese into mashed veggies; and add milk to soups.
* Stock up on affordable healthy foods, like eggs, canned beans, lentils, pilchards and tuna. Buy wholegrains (like brown rice and oats) in bulk, and seasonal fruit and vegetables, which cost less. As far as possible, cut out sugary drinks and drink water instead.
* If you drink alcohol, moderation is key. Too much can lead to unwanted weight gain and increase your risk for developing high blood pressure, stroke and breast cancer later in life. Binge drinking is toxic, so stop at the recommended limit of one alcoholic drink a day.

**In your 30s**

* Iron-deficiency anaemia is common among pre-menopausal women, as you lose a lot of iron through menstruation. Keep up your iron-levels by eating enough foods like liver, lean meats, legumes, nuts, dried fruit, whole grains, eggs, fortified foods, and dark green leafy vegetables.
* If you’re very busy, plan your week’s meals and give online shopping a try to save time and effort.
* Prepare [healthy meals](https://www.discovery.co.za/portal/individual/healthyfood-studio) in advance for days when you’ll be too busy to cook from scratch. For example, cook in bulk on weekends and freeze portions separately for the week ahead. Packing a [healthy lunchbox](https://www.discovery.co.za/vitality/news-june17-healthy-lunchbox-quick-snacks) will lower the temptation to buy unhealthy foods at work.
* Staying hydrated aids concentration, so keep a bottle of water on your desk and finish it by the end of the day. If plain water is too bland, throw in fresh fruit or vegetable chunks for flavour, or try unsweetened herbal teas.
* If you’re trying for a baby, speak to your doctor about folic acid supplements to prevent birth defects.

**In your 40s**

* As you age, you’re likely to pick up weight more easily due to hormonal changes, and because your energy needs lessen as you lose muscle mass. Control your intake by choosing nutrient-dense foods most of the time, and avoid processed foods high in saturated fats and added sugar.
* Eat [oily fish](https://www.discovery.co.za/portal/individual/rainbow-trout-ceviche) (such as salmon, mackerel, and sardines) at least twice a week to reduce your chances of developing heart disease and to slow down cognitive decline.
* Keep your salt intake to less than a teaspoon a day. Eating too much salt increases your risk for high blood pressure, and consequently for heart attacks and strokes. Cut down on sodium-rich foods, like cured meats, crisps and salty snacks, and opt for potassium-rich fruits and veggies instead, which support your kidneys and normalise blood pressure.
* Shop smart by learning to read nutritional labels, as salt and sugar is often hidden in everyday items like bread, sauces, and ready-made meals.
* If you’re menopausal, include enough calcium-rich foods in your diet as you’re at increased risk for developing osteoporosis (weak and brittle bones).

**In your 50s and beyond:**

* As you grow older, you’re more likely to develop deficiencies in vitamin B12, vitamin D and calcium. Try as much as you can to meet your nutrient needs through food, but consult a dietician and use fortified foods or supplements if required.
* Reduce your cancer risk by eating more fresh fruits and [vegetables](https://www.discovery.co.za/portal/individual/versatile-vegetables) (these are high in phytochemicals – plant compounds that help protect against cancer) and less processed meats.
* Immune function decreases with age. Help counter it with zinc-rich foods (like lean meats, oysters, dairy, beans, nuts, and seeds) and folate-rich foods (like liver, yeast, spinach and Brussels sprouts).
* Older adults often struggle with constipation. Choose high-fibre foods over refined products to help prevent or relieve it.
* To counter any loss of taste and smell, flavour foods with a variety of salt-free spices and herbs, lemon juice, or vinegar.

Vitality’s take-home tip for women of all ages? Smith concludes, “One of the best things you can do for your body is to make vegetables, especially dark green leafy ones, a priority in your diet. This one change can make a world of difference to your health, and that of your family’s.”