

# Chapter 7

## FROM SOUP TO NUTS

Is there an easy way to plan, shop for and cook healthy meals?

What about convenience foods like frozen dinners and canned soups – are they healthy?

Do I really need to read food labels?

How can I eat healthy meals when I'm on a tight budget?





## CHAPTER 7 FROM SOUP TO NUTS

Many seniors find that they simply do not want to cook anymore, especially if they are living and eating alone. Others find it difficult to get out to shop for food, while still others would rather just skip eating than take the time to prepare a healthy meal.

This chapter is devoted to the idea that making and eating healthy food does not have to be difficult, time consuming or expensive.

### Is there an easy way to plan, shop for and cook healthy meals?

Preparing good food will always take some time, but here are a few tips to make planning and cooking healthy meals a bit easier:

#### Plan ahead

- Start by deciding on the essential supplies that you should always have in your kitchen. Take a look at What things should I always have in my kitchen? in Chapter 8. This is a list of basic, healthy foods we recommend you have in your kitchen all the time. (You will also need these items to prepare the recipes in Chapter 11.)
- Try to build your meals with food from all four food groups recommended in Canada's Food Guide (Appendix B). Vegetables and fruit should always make up at least half your meal, but also include grains for energy and fibre, a small amount of meat or meat alternatives and low-fat dairy products for protein. And check out our one-week meal plan (Appendix A). Based on Canada's Food Guide, this plan lays out menus for one week's worth of healthy meals and snacks.



## CHAPTER 7 FROM SOUP TO NUTS

- Take a little time to think about what you want to eat for the next week and make a list of possible meals. Don't forget to take a look at what's in your fridge and freezer and try to use up what you have first, before buying fresh. Also check the weekly food specials at your local grocery store for good buys. Add what you really need to your grocery list.
- Consider making at least one meal a week that you can break into smaller portions and freeze for another day, such as a casserole, soup, chili or stew.

### Make it easy on yourself

- Buy and use canned or frozen vegetables and fruit (you don't have to clean or chop them). You receive the same health benefits from canned, frozen or dried vegetables and fruit as you do from fresh and they are often cheaper. Canned and frozen vegetables and fruit are packed at the height of their nutritional value, when they are ripe. Just make sure that your canned fruit is packed in water or juice, rather than in syrup.
- Use bagged, pre-washed greens and pre-cut vegetables. Always remember though: you should still wash the greens again at home, even if they are pre-washed.
- Visit the deli for items like lean turkey and lean roast beef or barbecue chicken. Remember to trim off the fat and skin from chicken.
- Many grocery stores offer free delivery for seniors if you have a reasonably large order, so save your energy if you need to! Make sure you say how much of each item you want: you don't want to order more than you can eat.
- Don't let pain or stiffness interfere with healthy eating. If you find it difficult to open a jar or a can or use certain kitchen utensils, help may be available. Electric can openers, for example, are easier to use if you have arthritis, while grip pads can help with jars.

## Leftover tips

- Add leftover cooked vegetables to a pasta sauce, tossed salad, casserole, soup, omelette or stir fry.
- Use leftover fruit as a tasty topping for your breakfast cereal, whole grain pancakes or waffles, yogurt or tossed salad. Or blend your leftover fruit with some milk and yogurt for a healthy fruit smoothie.
- Add leftover meat to a casserole, salad, pasta sauce or soup or use it in a sandwich.
- If you've got extra cooked ground beef, freeze it to use another day for chili or stuffed peppers.
- Add leftover pasta to a salad, soup or casserole.
- Use leftover rice for rice pudding or throw it into soups or casseroles.
- Leftover bread makes great croutons for salads or grind it up to coat chicken or fish.
- Leftover spaghetti and meat sauce easily becomes a great chili if you add kidney beans, chopped vegetables and chili seasoning.
- To ensure your food remains safe to eat, reheat leftovers once only.



## CHAPTER 7 FROM SOUP TO NUTS

### It can be done



Surjit Lalli's husband had his first heart bypass operation in 1978. He's had two more since then, but today, at 78, he is slim, healthy and "always active, always on the go."

"I've spent the last 28 years looking for new things, for new ways to cook our traditional food in a healthy way," says Surjit, "and we're both doing really well. We believe in good food and exercise."

In 2001, Surjit helped lead a series of 11 workshops for 120 other Indo-Canadian women in the Lower Mainland. "There are a number of people in the South Asian community with lots of health problems, mostly from eating fried things and lots of sugar," she says. "It's hard when you are used to one way of cooking and sometimes people don't like to try new things. But if you can see that it's not really difficult to modify your traditional recipes and you start to like the way something tastes, you'll eat it more and it will just become a part of your food and the way you eat."

Surjit also points out that, while 120 women may seem like a small number, they all have family, friends and neighbours, so "the knowledge about healthy eating just keeps on going."

## When it's time to cook

- Try cooking with a friend for company, but remember that eating alone can be just as enjoyable as eating with others. You can cook what you want to eat and eat where and when you want. Sit near a window where you can watch the birds or perhaps take your lunch to the park or the beach for a picnic. Listen to music or the radio while cooking and eating if this makes meal times more enjoyable.
- Prepare complete meals when you have the most energy. This may mean having your main meal at noon, with just a bowl of soup and whole grain crackers and cheese for dinner.
- Use a blender, chopper or food processor to make chopping your vegetables fast and easy.
- Prepare a little bit extra every time. The next day, you can add your leftover vegetables to your salad or leftover chicken to your sandwich. (See Chapter 9 for information about handling leftovers.)
- Clean up and put things away while your food cooks, so you won't have as much to do later.

## Cook the easy way

It does not have to take a lot of time or a lot of work to make a healthy meal. For example:

- Add a hard-boiled egg or tin of tuna, plus leftover or frozen vegetables, to macaroni and cheese. Complete your meal with a glass of milk.
- Add tofu cubes to cooked noodles, stir in leftover or frozen vegetables and bake. Serve with low fat yogurt for dessert.

## Two cooking ideas

Consider starting up a community kitchen with a group of friends or neighbours. You meet to plan, shop and prepare several meals together at one time. Then everyone gets to take home an equal share of the meals to freeze for another day.

Or how about a healthy eating club, where once a week one member hosts the club and makes the soup or an entrée? The others bring a salad, bread or fruit.



## CHAPTER 7 FROM SOUP TO NUTS

### Shopping and cooking for one or two

It's hard to cook for one or two after spending years cooking for a family. You may find you are buying and making too much food and a lot of it is going to waste. Or you may find you are freezing too many portions of the same thing and it's boring to keep eating it! Some ideas:

- Look for recipes intended for one or two (like the ones in Chapter 11), or revise larger recipes for four or six by cutting them in half.
- Keep bread in the freezer, well wrapped. Take out one or two slices at a time. It will last up to three months in the freezer.
- Buy from the bulk food bins. These bins let you choose exactly how much you want of such essentials as brown rice, bran, cereals, whole wheat pasta, dried fruit and nuts. Store bulk foods in sealed plastic or glass containers.
- Buy three pieces of fruit at a time, so you don't waste any. One ripe, one medium ripe and one unripe. Eat the ripe one right away.
- Replace your big, family-style cooking utensils with smaller pots, ovenproof dishes and baking pans. Your food will cook more quickly and the clean up will be easier.
- Look for small portions of items like chicken and fish. Or buy larger portions and divide them into freezer bags when you get home (try to use within a few months) or share with a friend.

- Mix an egg into lean ground beef and form into a burger, pan fry and serve with a cheese slice in a whole wheat bun. Have fruit for dessert.
- Scramble two eggs with a little low fat milk, add some chopped up vegetables, top with grated, low-fat cheese and serve with whole wheat toast.
- Stir fry some vegetables and black beans in a pan, add a little grated cheese, then serve with a whole wheat bun.
- Sauté onions and garlic with a tin of beans. Add your favourite Indian spices and serve over brown rice.
- Add a can of beans to a canned low-fat, low-salt vegetable soup and serve with brown rice and fruit.
- Buy pre-made hamburger or veggie burger patties and serve on a whole wheat bun with a salad and a glass of milk.
- Buy or make hummus (a chickpea dip), spread it on whole wheat pitas and serve with a salad and fruit.
- Take leftover dahl (lentils) or sabji (a vegetable dish) and spread them on a whole wheat tortilla or wrap, instead of a traditional roti or chapatti.

Skip the cooking occasionally

Not all meals require cooking.

Why not try:

- Peanut butter on whole wheat bread, with a glass of milk.
- Cottage cheese and fruit, with a whole grain muffin or toast and margarine.
- Canned low-fat, low-salt vegetable soup, with whole wheat crackers and yogurt for dessert.

### If pain or stiffness makes it hard for you to cook

Ask your doctor to refer you to an occupational therapist who can help you make adjustments and suggest special cooking utensils.

Or call the Arthritis Society of Canada's Arthritis Answer Line at 1 800 321-1433 or visit [www.arthritis.ca/bc](http://www.arthritis.ca/bc).



## CHAPTER 7 FROM SOUP TO NUTS

- Yogurt mixed with granola and fruit.
- Green salad and a whole wheat bun, with cheese slices or canned tuna and an apple.
- Canned baked beans, with whole wheat bread, fruit and a glass of milk.

### What about convenience foods like frozen dinners and canned soups – are they healthy?

Everyone resorts to convenience foods every once in a while. The key is to make sure it really is only every once in a while.

Manufacturers of convenience foods have traditionally filled their products with fats, salt, sugars and additives to make them taste good and to make them last longer on the shelf or in your freezer. However, manufacturers are now paying attention to increasing consumer concerns about food and its effect on health.

There has been a big improvement in the nutritional quality of some convenience foods. For example, some canned fish now contains much less salt, and you can now buy low-salt tomato juice, soy sauce and bouillon cubes. In addition, many baked goods, such as crackers and cookies, are now made without trans fats, and you can now find low-fat all-in-one frozen dinners, as well as healthy canned soups.

In addition, new food labeling regulations require manufacturers to show the ingredients and selected food values of their products. But you have to read the labels and you have to keep in mind your special health concerns.

Just remember, too: convenience foods are usually more expensive than making your own meals. And by making your own meals, you control what goes into them.

If you do decide to have a convenience food for lunch or dinner, make sure the rest of your food for the day is truly

healthy – low in fat, sugar and salt and high in fibre.

Do I really need to read food labels?

Yes, you really do need to read food labels. You need to know what you are eating, especially if you have an illness such as heart disease or diabetes, or you simply want to eat healthier.

Packaged food – food that comes in a box, can, bag, plastic container or heat-sealed wrap – has a lot of important information printed on the label. But you might want to take a pocket magnifier with you to the store: the labels are small!

Nutrition claims

Many packaged foods will have nutrition claims on the label, such as “low in fat,” “salt-free,” “high in fibre,” “no sugar added” or “an excellent source of vitamin C and E.”

These claims tell you about the nutrients inside the package and must, by Canadian law, meet strict standards. For example, for something to be labeled “low in fat,” it must contain no more than three grams of fat per serving. To be “high in fibre,” the product must contain at least four grams of dietary fibre per serving.

You should watch out, however, for claims that say things like “less salt” or “lower in salt or sodium than our regular product.” The product will, indeed, have less salt than the regular product, but if the regular product was very high in salt to begin with, the salt content may not be low enough for someone on a reduced salt diet.

### For more on food labels

The Canadian Diabetes Association and Dietitians of Canada have joined together to help consumers learn how to use the nutrition information on the labels of packaged foods to make healthy choices. Call 1 800 665-6526 or visit [www.healthyeatingisinstore.ca](http://www.healthyeatingisinstore.ca) and click on Virtual Grocery Store.



## CHAPTER 7 FROM SOUP TO NUTS

### Ingredient list

The ingredient list tells you what ingredients are in a packaged food. The first ingredient on the list is what the package contains the most of. The rest of the list goes in descending order, to what the package contains the least of.

For example, on a loaf of bread, you might see whole wheat flour followed by enriched white flour, rye flour and yeast. That means there is more whole wheat flour than white flour (which is good, although all whole wheat flour would be even better) and more white flour than rye flour or yeast.

### Nutrition Facts label

The Nutrition Facts label tells you:

1. The amount of food analyzed here. If you eat the amount listed here (in this example, 125 mL or half a cup), you will eat the amount of calories and receive the amount of nutrients listed on the label. If you eat double that amount (250 mL or one cup), you will eat double the calories and so on.
2. The number of calories in this amount of food. The label tells you how many calories (80 in this example) are in the amount analyzed. If you eat twice as much as the amount analyzed, you will eat 160 calories.
3. Percent daily value of each nutrient. The percent daily value tells you how much of a nutrient is in the amount analyzed, as a percentage of how much of this nutrient you should get in one day. It tells you whether you are getting a little or a lot of a nutrient.

That sounds complicated, but it really isn't. For example, this label tells you that the product contains 1% daily value of fat. That's one percent of all the fat you should eat in a day – so

that's not very much. It also says the product contains 0% saturated and trans fats and that's even better. That means whatever fat is in this product comes from monounsaturated or polyunsaturated fat, the healthy fats. (See Chapter 3 for more about healthy and unhealthy fats.)

**1** → Per 125 mL (87 g)

Amount	% Daily Value
<b>Calories</b> 80	
<b>Fat</b> 0.5 g	<b>1 %</b>
Saturates 0 g	<b>0 %</b>
+ Trans 0 g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 0 mg	
<b>Sodium</b> 0 mg	<b>0 %</b>
<b>Carbohydrate</b> 18 g	<b>6 %</b>
Fibre 2 g	<b>8 %</b>
Sugars 2 g	
<b>Protein</b> 3 g	
Vitamin A 2 %	Vitamin C 10 %
Calcium 0 %	Iron 2 %

**2** → **Calories** 80

**3** → **1 %**

This label also says that the product has 10% daily value of vitamin C, so if you are looking for something to boost your vitamin C consumption, this is good for you. (See Chapter 4 for more about essential vitamins.)



## CHAPTER 7 FROM SOUP TO NUTS

### How can I eat healthy meals when I'm on a tight budget?

If you are on a tight budget, you may want to stay away from convenience foods. They can cost more than cooking from scratch. Here are some other tips:

#### Shopping

- Some grocery stores offer discount days for seniors.
- Store brands are often cheaper than major brands, but always check the stickers. Also check the unit price of each item (the price per gram or kilogram, for example). You may find that the bigger sizes are not always the best buy.
- Buy from the bulk food bins. These bins let you choose exactly how much you want, so you won't waste food. Bulk items are also usually cheaper, but check the unit price to be sure.
- Top grade items may look better, but they have no more nutritional value than lower grade ones.
- Check the "best before" dates on all fresh foods, and especially items such as milk and yogurt, to make sure you will be able to eat all you've bought before it spoils.
- Buy smaller portions so that food will not go bad before you eat it. If you can't find them, ask the store manager to bring them in.
- Check grocery store flyers and newspaper ads and plan your meals around the items that are on sale.

#### Grains

- Buy grains, such as brown rice, in bulk or on sale.
- Buy dry whole grain pasta on sale – it will store well for a long time. Plain pasta shapes like macaroni and spaghetti are cheaper than fancy shapes.
- Many bakeries and grocery stores discount their breads and rolls at the end of the day. Buy a couple of loaves or a dozen

rolls then, and freeze. Bread freezes up to three months. Remember that whole grain breads, such as 100 percent whole wheat, stone-ground whole wheat, cracked wheat or oatmeal, are healthier than white bread.

- Whole grain cereal, such as rolled oats, is cheaper and better for you than sugary, refined cereals.

#### Vegetables and fruit

- Buying local vegetables and fruit that are in season is much less expensive than buying imported vegetables and fruit. Or pick your own fruits and berries in season and freeze.
- Canned and frozen vegetables and fruit are just as healthy as fresh and they are cheaper than out-of-season fresh vegetables and fruit. Buy canned fruit packed in water or juice. Remember that sliced canned fruit is a better buy than whole or halves.
- Buy fresh fruit and vegetables in amounts you can use before they go bad. Buy five carrots or three apples if that is all you need.
- Grow your own vegetables in a container garden.
- Plain, bagged frozen vegetables are half the cost – and lower in fat and salt – than vegetables that are boxed and packaged with added sauces.
- Frozen orange juice concentrate is a better buy than juice in a carton. Be sure to buy the unsweetened kind.

#### Milk products

- Buy milk in large (4 L) recyclable plastic jugs – it's cheaper than buying it in smaller jugs. If you can't drink that much before its "best before" date, however, smaller cartons (one or two litres) are cheaper than the smaller plastic jugs.
- Buy cheese in blocks that you can slice or grate as you need it.
- Buy plain, no-name, low-fat yogurt and add fruit yourself. Larger containers are cheaper than single serving sizes.



## CHAPTER 7 FROM SOUP TO NUTS

### Meat and alternatives

- Buy cheaper and leaner cuts of meat, such as blade, chuck, flank, or rump roast. Marinate or slow cook these in broth or tomato juice to make them tender.
- Cook with dried or canned beans and lentils more often than meat. They are not only cheaper than meat, but also lower in fat and are a good source of fibre.
- Buy a whole chicken instead of individually wrapped pieces. It's cheaper and you can cut it up the way you like it.
- Plain frozen fish and canned tuna and salmon are inexpensive alternatives to fresh fish and just as healthy.
- Cold cuts from the deli counter are cheaper than pre-packaged brand-name products. Choose those that are less salty, such as plain roast beef or turkey, rather than processed ham or bologna.

# Healthy Eating

## QUIZ # 6

### True or False?

1. Nutrition Facts boxes on packaged food are too complicated to understand and I don't really need to read them.

False. Nutrition Facts boxes are really quite simple if you take a little time. They also provide you with very important information. See this chapter for more information.

2. I should never eat frozen dinners or canned soup.

False. Everyone deserves a night off from cooking now and then. Just make sure you read the labels carefully and pick frozen dinners or canned soups that are low in salt and low in fat.

3. I always have to cook an elaborate meal to make sure it's healthy.

False. There are many ways to eat a healthy meal with little or no cooking. See our "skip the cooking occasionally" tips in this chapter.

4. Fresh vegetables and fruit are expensive.

False. Vegetables and fruit can be expensive if you are buying them out of season, when they have to be imported from elsewhere. Vegetables and fruit in season are much less expensive, especially if they come from local farms.