

Sodium, Saturated Fat, Highly Processed Foods, and Refined Grains

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) emphasize a diet built on whole, nutrient-dense foods (e.g., protein, dairy, vegetables, fruits, healthy fats, and whole grains). This provides individuals with vitamins, minerals, and other health-promoting components that have little added sugar, saturated fat, and sodium. When meal planning, nutrient-dense, whole food options should always be the priority, where feasible. The DGAs are designed to meet the needs of most people. Individuals with specific health conditions may require different recommendations and should consult their doctor or a registered dietitian for personalized guidance.

Sodium

Sodium is needed, in small amounts, for the body to work properly. For most people, diets high in sodium can lead to high blood pressure, which increases risk of cardiovascular diseases. It can also affect kidney function and increase swelling and water retention for those who are sensitive to sodium. However, sodium needs vary. Having some conditions, like postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS), may mean someone requires more sodium, not less. Check with your doctor about what's right for you.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), nearly 9 in 10 U.S. adults exceed the daily recommended sodium intake of 2,300 mg. Males consistently exceed the recommendation at significantly higher rates than females across all age groups. Highly processed, packaged, and ready-to-eat foods are some of the main sources of excess sodium. Limiting or avoiding these foods is one of the most effective strategies for reducing sodium intake.

Tips for Reducing Sodium When Working With Your Food Service or Cooking Onsite

- Choose no added salt or reduced sodium products.
- Limit or avoid highly processed and packaged foods.
- Limit foods that have hidden sodium, such as processed cheese and processed meats.
- Add plant-based proteins, which are generally lower in sodium compared to processed meats, poultry, and seafood.
- Use herbs and spices rather than salt. This could include rosemary, garlic, basil, chili, cayenne, cumin, oregano, paprika, thyme, and turmeric.

Saturated Fat

Fat is an essential part of a person's daily nutrient needs, but some fats are better than others. A diet high in saturated fats can increase the risk of heart disease, weight gain, and high cholesterol. According to

USDA dietary intake data, more than half of older adults exceed the recommended daily limit of saturated fat, which should comprise less than 10% of total daily calories. Senior nutrition program menu planners should track saturated fat totals carefully and understand that the inclusion of full-fat dairy and unprocessed meat can make staying within the recommended limit more challenging.

Tips for Reducing Saturated Fat on the Menu

- Use olive oil, where feasible, because it provides essential fatty acids.
- Avoid highly processed or refined oils (e.g., partially hydrogenated vegetable oil).
- Choose unprocessed meats (e.g., lean cuts and poultry) over processed or cured meats.
- Incorporate dairy without added sugar, where feasible.
- If incorporating full-fat dairy, which is an option, be sure to account for the saturated fat contribution in the overall menu planning.
- Offer desserts that are lower in fat and added sugars (e.g., fruit crisp or baked fruit).

Highly Processed Foods

Highly processed foods are defined as those containing refined grains, added sugars, excess sodium, unhealthy fats, and long ingredient lists with chemical additives — this includes artificial sweeteners, flavor enhancers, artificial colors, and emulsifiers.

A diet high in highly processed foods can lead to weight gain, chronic disease, poor gut health, and vitamin and mineral deficiencies. Examples of highly processed foods include chips, cookies, candy, sugary cereals, sugar-sweetened beverages, packaged snacks, processed deli meats, and ready-to-eat convenience foods.

Tips for Reducing Highly Processed Food on the Menu

- Prioritize whole, minimally processed ingredients (e.g., raw or simply prepared vegetables, unprocessed meats, whole grains, whole fruits, plain dairy).
- Serve unprocessed foods (e.g., roasted or steamed vegetables) rather than packaged or prepared alternatives.
- Choose whole fruits instead of fruit-flavored products, juice drinks, or sweetened canned fruits.
- Limit or avoid sweet bakery products, packaged desserts, and convenience foods.
- Read ingredient labels; long lists, additives, or artificial colors signal high processing.
- Significantly reduce or avoid added sugars.

Refined Grains

Refined grains have had the bran and germ removed, causing the loss of dietary fiber, iron, and B vitamins. Whole grains contain all three parts of a grain: bran, germ, and endosperm. Seventy-four percent of Americans exceed limits for refined grains in their diets. Limiting refined grains is important because high amounts in a diet can lead to weight gain, type 2 diabetes, and decreased cardiovascular health.

Tips for Reducing Refined Grains on the Menu

- Choose minimally processed whole grain products (e.g., oatmeal, brown rice, quinoa, bulgur, and whole wheat bread).
- Avoid or significantly limit white rice, white pasta, white bread, packaged crackers, and ready-to-eat grain products.
- Look for “whole grain” as the first ingredient on a food label; grain snacks do not need to exceed 5 grams of added sugar per $\frac{3}{4}$ oz of whole-grain equivalent.
- Look for the whole grain stamp on food products.
- Choose whole food grain sources (e.g., oats, rice, quinoa) over heavily fortified packaged grain cereals.

Nutrition Education

Many older adults depend on convenience foods to help with meal preparation. These highly processed foods can significantly increase overall sodium, fat, and added sugar intake.

Providing nutrition education can help participants understand that if one meal has a higher sodium content, it is recommended that their other meals be lower in sodium to help balance overall daily sodium intake.

The nutrient recommendations in this tip sheet are based on general guidelines for older adults. Individual needs may vary depending on health conditions, medications, and other personal factors. Participants should consult with their doctor or a registered dietitian to determine the nutrient intake that is right for them. Visit the Nutrition and Aging Resource Center [Nutrition Education webpage](#) for more resources.

Highest Sources of Sodium, Saturated Fat, Highly Processed Foods, and Refined Grains in SNP Menus

Sodium

- Sandwiches
- Mixed dishes with meat, poultry, and seafood
- Cured meats and poultry
- Soups
- Sweet bakery products
- Mashed potatoes

Saturated Fat

- Sandwiches with highly processed meats
- Added fats and oils
- Sweet bakery products
- Full-fat dairy
- Mixed dishes with meat, poultry, or seafood
- Meats

Highly Processed Foods

- Sweet bakery products
- Frozen dairy desserts, pudding, and gelatin
- Added fats and oils
- Sweetened beverages
- Packaged/processed snack foods
- Ready-to-eat convenience foods

Refined Grains

- Sweet bakery products
- Sandwiches
- Breads, rolls, and tortillas
- Grain-based mixed dishes
- Quick breads and breads

Adapted from ACL's Issue Brief: [Key Food Sources of Sodium, Saturated Fat, Empty Calories, and Refined Grains in the Diets of Program Participants](#)

Resources

- [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#)
- [Sodium in Your Diet](#) (FDA)
- [Healthy Eating As You Age: Know Your Food Groups](#) (National Institute on Aging)
- [NIH Halt the Salt – 5 Ways to Cut Down on Sodium](#) (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
- [Low-Salt Diet](#) (MedlinePlus)
- [About Sodium and Health](#) (CDC)
- [Tips for Reducing Sodium Without Reducing Flavor](#) (Nutrition and Aging Resource Center)

Last updated: September 2026