

What is it?

A low fat dietary approach restricts how much fat is eaten. The level of fat restriction can differ, but typically this way of eating involves having less than 70g fat per day (or less than 30% total calories from fat).

As you can see below, the guideline in the Nutrition for Health model is for people to have between 0 and 4 portions of fat per day when following this approach. This won't necessarily be the only fat they are having though, as there are often some of the essential fats in protein-based foods too.

As less fat is eaten, people following this approach will get most of their energy from minimally processed carbohydrates and from protein. The recommendation in the Nutrition for Health model is for people to have 5 to 14 portions of carbohydrates, and 3 to 6 portions of protein, per day when following this approach.

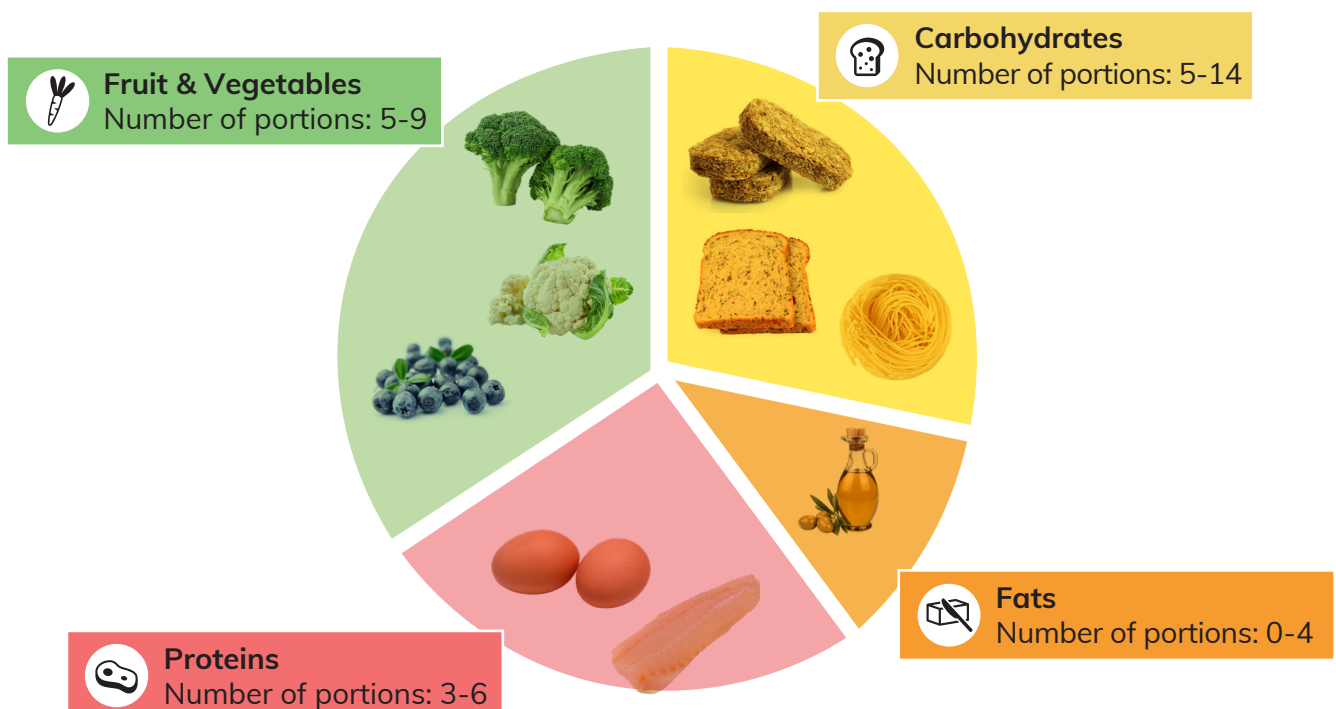
As with any dietary approach the exact number of portions people have from each food group will depend on their own personal needs, and they may need to adjust this if they are not meeting their health goals.

National guidelines

Current UK dietary guidance is based on a low fat style of eating. Low fat diets were introduced because it was believed that fat causes weight gain and heart disease. We now know that not all fats are bad for us though. In fact, guidance on diet worldwide is moving away from a “one size fits all” approach, acknowledging that different people have different needs.

A low fat dietary approach can still be a healthy way of eating though, if it is based on nutritious, minimally processed foods. But for many people (particularly those with diabetes) it may be beneficial to reduce carb intake to some extent.

As a rough guide: a portion of vegetables is about the size of your fist, a portion of carbohydrate is about one cupped handful (e.g., 2-4 tbsp breakfast cereal or 1-2 tbsp cooked rice or pasta), and a portion of fat is usually about the size of your thumb (e.g., 10ml butter or extra-virgin olive oil). For proteins, a portion of red meat is the size of your palm, and a portion of chicken or fish is roughly the size of your whole hand laid flat.



What are the benefits?



Following low fat guidance naturally results in a reduced intake of ultra-processed foods, as they often contain high amounts of processed fats. Avoiding these foods (e.g., crisps, cakes, biscuits and takeaway meals) can have a number of health benefits.

As well as the positive influence of avoiding certain foods, the foods they are replaced with can have some benefits. For example, wholegrain foods are high in fibre, which can help to keep us feeling fuller for longer and have other beneficial effects. Any dietary approach someone can stick to that is based on high quality foods can potentially improve their health.

What are the negatives?



A common mistake people make is to assume that the only aim of this approach is to reduce calories. This can lead to them solely focusing on calories, rather than considering overall nutritional quality. Swapping nutritious fat-containing foods (such as oily fish, eggs or nuts) for low calorie, low nutrition products (such as white bread, most breakfast cereals, and low fat snack bars) is unlikely to lead to health benefits. These foods are often not very filling either, so can lead to people feeling hungry a lot of the time, and overeating as a result.

Carbohydrate is the nutrient that has the biggest impact on blood glucose and insulin levels. High insulin levels can lead to increased insulin resistance, hunger and fat storage. This makes managing body weight more difficult too. Levels of protective HDL can also decrease, whilst fat in the blood (triglycerides) can increase, if carbohydrate intake is too high. These problems are more likely in people with prediabetes or diabetes, as the body is not as good at dealing with carbohydrate as it should be.

What foods are usually included?

Low fat foods have less than 3g fat per 100g. It is important to consider the other nutritional content of the food though. A food can be low in fat but provide few beneficial nutrients. For example, it might not contain many vitamins and minerals, any high quality protein, or any fibre. Foods labelled as low fat can even be bad for us, “low fat” yoghurts, for example, often contain lots of sugar.

When following this dietary approach meals are usually based on carbs from cereals, breads, rice, pasta or potatoes. It is important to choose wholegrain varieties where possible. Other key parts of this dietary approach include having:

- Plenty of vegetables and some whole fruit.
- Low fat milk and dairy.
- Fish, lean meat, and/or pulses (for protein).

Avoid sugary food and drinks, refined grains, refined oils, and other ultra-processed foods (these tend to have a long ingredients list).

A low fat dietary approach can be a good option, as long as the foods that are included are of a good enough quality. However, for many people with prediabetes or diabetes any way of eating that includes lots of carbohydrate can make it difficult to manage blood glucose levels, body weight, and other markers of health.

If this approach sounds like one you might enjoy then you may wish to experiment with it. However, as with any dietary approach, it is important to track key health markers and to consider factors such as mood and energy levels to see if you can meet your goals whilst following it.

