

How much meat do you really need?

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Meat is a good example of how information about food and health can get confusing. There are advertisements on television saying how important meat is for health, but there are also stories in the media saying that eating meat can be unhealthy. The facts are that meat is good as long as it's lean and eaten in moderation, along with a wide range of other healthy foods.

Meat contains nutrients including protein, iron, zinc and B vitamins which are important to health. But although some lean meats are very low in fat, others contain a lot of animal fat and this contributes to heart disease, overweight and other health problems. The healthiest way to eat meat is to choose the leanest cuts and remove all visible fat. Although leaner meat is more expensive, you only need a little - about 100g is enough for one serving.

Which meats are high in fat? When cuts of meat have a border of fat on them or are "marbled" with white fat, it's obvious where the fat is. But with some other meats fat is less easy to see. This includes some cheaper types of minced meat - this is why it's better to buy smaller amounts of more expensive, but leaner mince, or to ask your butcher to mince a piece of lean meat for you. Other high fat meats include sausage meat, sausages, salami, devon and bacon.

How can I get the right balance of meat and other foods?

One reason why traditional diets are usually healthier than the Australian diet is because they include small amounts of meat with a lot of vegetables and grain foods such as rice, pasta and bread. Australians, on the other hand, often put large servings of meat on the plate with small servings of vegetables. For good health, the foods we should eat most of

are plant foods like grains, vegetables and fruits which provide fibre and a wide range of other nutrients that help prevent disease. We need to fill up on these foods and eat meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy products in moderation. You don't need a serving of meat or chicken every day - it's good to add variety with fish (the National Heart Foundation recommends aiming for two fish meals each week). Other healthy and inexpensive substitutes for meat in meals include dried peas, beans and lentils, tofu and moderate amounts of nuts - these are ways of including more plant foods in the diet.

What are low fat ways to cook meat? Grilling, baking, stir-frying are all good. Roast meat (without added fat) on a rack so that fat drips away.

If you find that some cuts of lean meat are dry, marinate them before cooking. Make small quantities of lean meat go further in stews, stir fries and minced meat dishes, by adding extra vegetables, grains, pasta or noodles.

Should women eat more meat? Many women don't get enough iron in food. This can cause problems like anaemia and fatigue (though there are many other causes of fatigue).. Pregnant women, adolescent girls and women who do a lot of strenuous exercise need even more iron than other women. It's easiest for your body to absorb iron from foods like lean meat, poultry and fish. But other good sources of iron are dried peas and beans, lentils, bread (especially wholegrain), parsley, leafy Asian green vegetables, nuts, eggs and dried fruit - but because the body absorbs iron less easily from these foods, it's important to include a vitamin C-rich food in the meal, like tomatoes, parsley, broccoli, capsicum, orange juice or fruit. This helps you absorb the iron.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.