



FOOD VARIETY

Studies show that people who eat a wide variety of food are healthier, live longer and have reduced risk of developing lifestyle illness such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Different foods, particularly vegetables and fruit, contain a large number of naturally occurring substances known as phytochemicals. Currently, scientists have identified over 12,000 of these phytochemicals, many of which are thought to interfere with the processes that cause cancer and heart disease.

What is food variety?

Food variety refers to the consumption of a mixture of foods from the entire range of food groups (that is, vegetables, fruit, cereals, meat, fish and dairy products). The word variety indicates that a range of foods from each food group should be consumed. For example, instead of choosing one cereal product to eat, it is better to choose a selection of cereal products and alternate, say between wheat, oat, rye, rice, or barley. It is recommended that a variety of foods be eaten because the nutritional content of each food is very different. This is true even for foods that are from the same food group.

How much variety is enough?

Nutrition Australia encourages Australians to eat around 30 different foods each day. It is important to note that the number 30 refers to individual foods, and not the food categories outlined in the Food Variety Checklist below. Ideally, 20 - 30 different types of foods should be eaten every day. Nutrition Australia has made the following two recommendations to help people increase their food variety:

- Use the Food Variety Checklist to calculate how many different foods you are eating in a week. If your score is 'Fair', try and aim for 'Good' the next week, and continue in this way until your score is 'Very Good'. Don't be too hard on yourself if improving your score takes a little while – at Nutrition Australia we encourage long term improvements to diet, and acknowledge that long term changes sometimes take time to implement.
- Once you have achieved a 'Very Good' score, you are well on your way to meeting your goal of eating 30 different foods a day. You may be more successful on some days than others, but we encourage you to just keep on trying!

Tips for increasing food variety

- Choose a variety of foods from the Healthy Living Pyramid.
- Eat a range of different breakfast cereals and breads.
- Jazz up dishes with herbs and spices – these can transform a meal for little cost without adding salt or fat.
- Experiment with the different vegetables, fruits, cereals and meats available. Ask for tips on how to prepare and eat exotic produce.
- Remember, just because you haven't tried it, doesn't mean you won't like it.
- Give yourself time to get used to a new food – experts say that it can take humans up to nine tries of a new food to adjust to its flavour.

The following table provides some suggestions for increasing food variety in the diet.

Typical Diet	Suggestions for increasing variety
Wheatcereals, milk and orange juice	Muesli with added sunflower and pumpkin seeds, served with yoghurt and a mixture of fresh or dried fruits
White bread, toasted cheese and tomato sandwich using margarine for spread	Sandwich made on multigrain bread with cheese, chutney, tomato, lettuce and avocado
Meat and two vegetables	Cous Cous with chopped lamb fillet cooked with salt reduced soy sauce and ginger, served with stir-fry vegetables
Total of 11 foods	Total of 34 foods

Why not use the following Food Variety Checklist to test how varied your diet is for one week?

Simply following these two easy steps:

- Give yourself one point for each food category eaten throughout the week.
- Only score each food category once.

Food Variety Checklist	Your score
Give yourself one point for each food category you have eaten throughout one week. Count each food category only once.	
Fruit	
Stone Fruit (e.g. apricot, avocado, cherries, nectarine, olive, peach, plum, prune)	
Citrus (e.g. orange, lemon)	

Apples	
Bananas	
Berries (e.g. raspberry, strawberry)	
Grapes (including raisins, sultanas)	
Melons (e.g. honeydew, rockmelon, watermelon)	
Pears, nashi	
Tropical fruit (e.g. guava, jackfruit, lychee, mango, papaya, pineapple, starfruit)	
Dates, kiwifruit, passionfruit	
Vegetables	
Root vegetables (e.g. carrots, sweet potatoes, potatoes, bamboo shoots, beetroot, ginger, parsnip, radish, water chestnut)	
Leafy Greens (e.g. spinach, cabbage, burrsell sprouts, silverbeet)	
Marrow-like vegetables (e.g. cucumber, eggplant, marrow, pumpkin, squash, swede, turnip, zucchini)	
Flowers (e.g. broccoli, cauliflower, edive, chicory, lettuce)	
Stalks (e.g. celery)	
Onions (e.g. spring onion, garlic, leek)	
Peppers (e.g. capsicum)	
Tomatoes, okra	
Legumes/Pulses	
Beans (e.g. green beans, snow peas, snap beans, dried peas)	
Adzuki, baked beans, haricot, black beans, black eyed beans, borlotti beans, cannellini beans, chickpeas kidney beans, lentils, lima beans, lupins, mung beans (sprouts), pinto beans, soya beans (sprouts), soya milk, bean curd	
Grains and Cereals	
Wheat (including ready-to-eat cereals such as Weebix, brans flakes and wholemeal/white bread)	
Rye (includes ready-to-eat products)	

Barley (includes ready-to-eat products)	
Oats (includes ready-to-eat products)	
Rice (includes ready-to-eat products)	
Corn (includes ready-to-eat products)	
All other grains and cereals (e.g. buckwheat, millet, quinoa, sago, semolina, tapioca, triticale)	
Meat	
Pork (including ham and bacon)	
Lamb, beef, veal	
Poultry (e.g. chicken, turkey, duck)	
Game (e.g. quail, wild duck, pigeon)	
Liver, brain, all other organ meats	
Seafood	
Shellfish and molluscs (e.g. mussels, squid, oysters, scallops)	
Crustaceans (e.g. prawns, lobster, crabs, shrimps)	
Fatty Fish (e.g. anchovies, tuna, salmon, sardines, herring, mackerel, kipper, pilchards)	
Fish (saltwater)	
Fish (freshwater)	
Roe (caviar)	
Dairy	
Milk, yoghurt (without live culture), ice cream, cheese	
Live Cultures (yoghurt with live culture e.g. acidophilus, bifidobacteria)	
Eggs	
All varieties	
Fats	
Oil	

Hard/soft spreads	
Herbs and Spices	
Use regularly	
Nuts and Seeds	
Almond, brazil, chashew, chestnut, coconut, hazelnut, peanuts, peanut butter, pecan, pine nut, pistachio, pumpkin seed, sesame seed, tahini, hommus, sunflower seed, walnut	
Fermented Foods	
Miso, tempeh, soya sauce	
Sauerkraut	
All other varieties	
Beverages	
Non-alcoholic (e.g. tea, coffee, cocoa)	
Alcoholic	
Other	
Sugar, syrup, honey, confectionary, jam, marmalade, chocolate, soft drinks	
Yeast (e.g. vegemite, marmite, brewers yeast)	
Water including mineral and spring water	
TOTAL AMOUNT OF DIFFERENT FOODS	

References:

Savige, G.S., Hau-Hage, B. and Wahlqvist, M.L. Food Variety as Nutritional Therapy. Current Therapeutics, March 1997, p. 62.

Walker, J. and Fisher, G. (1997) Food Secrets: Brisbane: The Australian Nutrition Foundation (Qld Div) Inc.

How Did You Go?

Check you score on food variety and dietary adequacy using the following chart:

Total Food Variety Score	Dietary Adequacy
>30/week	Very Good
25-29/week	Good
20-24/week	Fair
<20/week	Poor
<10/week	Very Poor