

MyPlate: Your Guide to Simple, Healthy Eating in Montana

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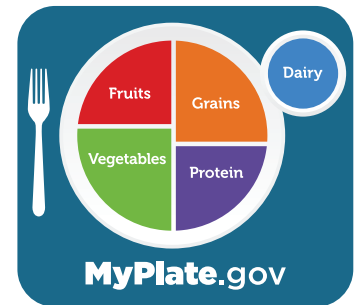
What if there were an easy meal plan that guided you to eat the foods you most enjoy? MyPlate is an important tool to help the public take small, simple steps toward a healthier dietary pattern. Only 7 percent of Montanans eat two or more fruits and vegetables a day. Instead of trying the latest diet trends, most of us in the United States have opportunities to make small changes, add foods, or change ingredients in what we already eat to more closely align with MyPlate guidelines. With many different growing regions in Montana, we have unique opportunities to support local producers across all food groups. This guide will highlight 1) how MyPlate is developed, 2) key MyPlate guidelines, 3) how to find trusted nutrition information, and 4) how to set a SMART goal for healthy eating and long-term health.

Developing the dietary guidelines for Americans and MyPlate

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is a federal agency with numerous functions, one of which is to enhance public health and promote nutrition education. These guidelines have been developed and revised through a rigorous scientific review process since the 1980s. Every five years, they bring together a group of health and nutrition experts to review the research and provide recommendations to the American public. Federal agencies, state and community assistance programs, local institutions, and healthcare professionals use this guidance to help audiences of all ages, backgrounds, and demographics understand simple components of healthy eating.

See the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. **Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025. 9th Edition.** December 2020. Available at [DietaryGuidelines.gov](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov).

MyPlate is a visual that shows healthy eating patterns, portion sizes, and important food groups to nourish the body and promote health. It can be customized to fit diverse dietary needs, preferences, cultural traditions, and budgets. Research shows that following MyPlate guidelines can help maintain a healthy weight, support metabolism, protect dental health, and reduce the risk of nutrition-related diseases.



What are the MyPlate Components?

VEGETABLES: EAT A VARIETY OF COLORS

- **What counts?**

Vegetables can be fresh, frozen, canned, dried, or in 100% vegetable juice.

- **Key nutrients and benefits**

Vegetables provide potassium, fiber, folate, Vitamin A, and Vitamin C. Potassium helps control blood pressure, and fiber supports digestion and heart health.

- **Local options**

Montana farmers grow tomatoes, zucchini, winter squash, garlic, cauliflower, broccoli, carrots, potatoes, onions, cucumbers, and more.

- **Best choices**

Vegetables in any form are great options. Canned or frozen vegetables are just as nutritious as fresh. Try to choose options with little or no added salt. Look for fresh, in-season vegetables at local farmers' markets or through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs.

FRUIT: FOCUS ON WHOLE FRUITS

- **What counts?**
Fruits can be fresh, canned, dried, frozen, or in 100% fruit juice.
- **Key nutrients and benefits**
Fruits provide fiber, vitamins, and antioxidants. Fiber helps with digestion and disease prevention, but fruit juices contain little or no fiber.
- **Local options**
Montana farmers grow apples, cherries, raspberries, haskap berries, or self-harvested fruits like huckleberries or serviceberries.
- **Best choices**
Choose whole or cut-up fruits instead of juice for more fiber. When buying canned fruit, look for options packed in water or natural juice instead of syrup.

GRAINS: MAKE HALF YOUR GRAINS WHOLE

- **What counts?**
Grain products come from wheat, rice, oats, corn, barley, or other cereal grains. This includes bread, pasta, cereals, tortillas, rice, and popcorn.
- **Key nutrients and benefits**
Whole grains provide fiber, iron, and B vitamins. Fiber helps digestion and supports heart health. Refined grains, like white flour and white rice, lose some of these nutrients.
- **Local options**
Montana farmers grow barley, wheat, brown rice, and farro.
- **Best choices**
Look for “100% Whole Grain” on labels. Choose whole-wheat bread, oatmeal, brown rice, and popcorn instead of refined grains like in white bread and white rice.

PROTEIN: MIX IT UP

- **What counts?**
Protein foods include seafood, meat, poultry, eggs, beans, peas, lentils, nuts, seeds, and soy products.
- **Key nutrients and benefits**
Protein helps build and repair muscles. Different protein sources provide various vitamins and minerals. For example, beans and lentils offer fiber, while beef provides iron and zinc.

- **Local options**
Montana is the top U.S. producer of lentils and also grows beans and chickpeas. Many Montana ranchers raise beef, bison, poultry or eggs.
- **Best choices**
Eat a mix of plant and animal proteins. Choose lean meats and poultry, and try plant-based options like beans, lentils, and nuts.

DAIRY: CHOOSE LOW-FAT OR FORTIFIED OPTIONS

- **What counts?**
The dairy group includes milk, yogurt, cheese, lactose-free milk, and fortified soy milk and yogurt.
- **Key nutrients and benefits**
Dairy provides calcium, protein, and vitamins A and D, which help keep bones and muscles strong.
- **Local options**
Montana has many dairy farms that produce milk, cheese, and yogurt.
- **Best choices**
Choose low-fat or fat-free dairy. If avoiding dairy, try fortified soy milk or other calcium-rich foods like tofu, tahini, and leafy greens.

LIMIT SODIUM, SATURATED FAT, AND ADDED SUGARS

Eating too much sodium, saturated fat, or added sugar can increase the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, and other health problems. Making small changes can help improve diet and overall health.

Why they matter

- **Sodium:** A mineral that helps the brain send signals to the body and supports fluid balance. However, too much can raise blood pressure and strain the heart and kidneys.
- **Saturated fat:** A type of fat that helps build cell membranes and store energy. In excess, it can raise cholesterol and increase the risk of heart disease.
- **Added sugars:** A quick source of energy for the body, but consuming too much can lead to weight gain and increase the risk of diabetes and other health issues. Not recommended for children under 2 years old.

What and where they are

- **Sodium:** A mineral found in salt. Packaged snacks, canned goods, frozen meals, condiments, sauces, and pickled foods.

- **Saturated fat:** A type of fat that is usually solid at room temperature. Butter, lard, whole milk, coconut oil, palm oil, and fatty meats.
- **Added sugars:** Sugars and syrups added to food and drinks during processing. Sodas, coffee/tea drinks, energy drinks, candy, baked goods, flavored yogurts, and processed foods.

Healthier choices

- **Lower sodium:** Check **Nutrition Facts** labels and choose low-sodium options. Cook with herbs and spices instead of salt. Rinse canned foods to remove extra sodium. Try to keep sodium to less than 2,300 milligrams a day.
- **Less saturated fat:** Replace butter and lard with oils like olive or canola oil. Choose lean meats, nuts, and seeds for healthier fats. Try to keep saturated fat to less than 22 grams a day.
- **Reduce added sugars:** Read ingredient labels and pick foods with little or no added sugar. Choose water over sugary drinks and whole fruits instead of sweets. Try to keep added sugars to less than 50 grams a day.

Finding reliable nutrition information

The media can be overwhelming when it comes to nutrition advice. Sometimes, it shares confusing or conflicting information about what nutrition research really means. To ensure you receive accurate, research-informed information, rely on federal organizations, public health institutions, and qualified professionals, such as Registered Dietitians (RDs). Some titles, like nutritionist or health coach, may not always require consistent or research-based education or training.

Even among trusted sources, nutrition recommendations may vary. This doesn't mean the advice is wrong — it reflects the fact that everyone has different nutritional needs. Factors like ethnicity, cultural traditions, age, gender, health conditions, and personal goals all play a role in what works best for each person.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to nutrition. Look for credible sources that recognize these differences and provide balanced, science-based advice.

MyPlate healthy eating goals

Setting a **SMART** goal can help to make healthier food choices based on MyPlate guidelines. A SMART goal is **Specific**, **Measurable**, **Achievable**, **Relevant**, and **Time-bound**. Use this worksheet to create a goal that fits specific needs.

STEP 1: CHOOSE A MYPLATE FOCUS AREA

Which food group do you want to improve? (Check one)

- ☐ Vegetables ☐ Fruits ☐ Protein
☐ Dairy ☐ Grains

STEP 2: WRITE A SMART GOAL

Use the prompts below to create a strong goal.

- **Specific:** What exactly do you want to improve?
Example: I want to eat more vegetables with meals.
- **Measurable:** How will you track progress?
Example: I will eat vegetables with at least two meals per day.
- **Achievable:** Is this goal realistic? What steps will help?
Example: I will buy pre-cut veggies to make it easier.
- **Relevant:** Why is this goal important?
Example: Eating more vegetables will help me feel healthier and have more energy.
- **Time-bound:** When will you complete this goal?
Example: I will follow this plan for one month and check my progress.

STEP 3: WRITE A FULL SMART GOAL

Example: I will eat vegetables with at least two meals per day for the next month by keeping pre-cut veggies in my fridge for easy access.

Now, write a SMART goal below:

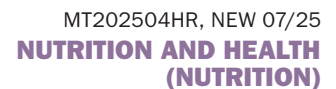
My SMART Goal: _____

STEP 4: PLAN FOR SUCCESS

- What challenges might come up? How will you handle them?
- Who can support you in reaching the goal?
- How will you reward yourself for progress?

Use this worksheet to stay on track and build a healthier eating habit.

Special thanks to reviewers Chloe Lundquist, RD and Havilah Burton, Nutrition Education Program Educators and Tasha Shaffer MS, PhD student in Exercise and Nutrition.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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