Nutrition & Brain Health: You are what you eat!

Image: David Malan / Getty Images

We say “food” for all things humans eat. But, this can be misleading because **not all “food” is equal.**

So, what is food?

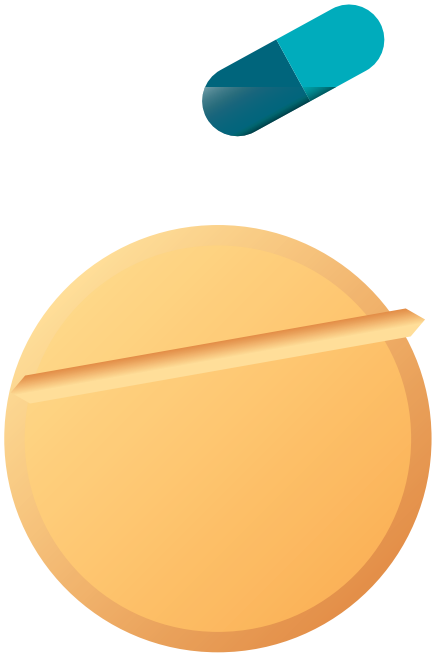
There are natural foods and unnatural foods. A natural food is something that does not have any ingredients in it. For example, an apple is a natural food because there is not an “apple ingredient.” An apple just exists.

An unnatural food is made from combining different ingredients. Bread, fruit snacks, popsicles, and potato chips are made of lots of different pieces. These are all examples of unnatural food. In most cases, natural food is healthier than unnatural food.

> **“Vitamins and supplements do not replace fruits and vegetables.”**

The chemicals inside a natural food are hard to create outside of that food. Chemicals that are unnatural are called synthetic. Synthetic ingredients are not as healthy compared to what is found in real, natural food. If you want to add healthier foods to your diet, you are better off eating natural foods than unnatural foods. For example, if you want to eat more fruit, eat real and natural fruit instead of “fruit snacks”.

The same guidance applies to vitamins and supplements. Although taking vitamins and supplements can be a good, vitamins and supplements should never replace eating real, natural food.



Ideal diets consist of more natural food than unnatural food. Your body's cells are made up of what you eat. **You are, quite literally, what you eat.**

What is an ideal diet?

What people eat varies all across the world. For example, a typical American diet is different from a typical Chinese diet. What makes for an ideal diet is this: eating more natural food (like apples, bananas, carrots, and spinach) and less unnatural food (like chips, pretzels, bread, and pasta).

This is important because, quite literally, you are what you eat. Consider this, the human brain is 60% fat and the fat cells in the human brain come from what is eaten. In other words, what you eat forms the building blocks of your body's cells. Eating natural foods will make your body's cells healthier than eating unnatural foods.

A brain with fat cells made from natural foods, like the fat from avocadoes or from extra-virgin olive oil, is going to be healthier than a brain with fat cells made from butter or processed cheeses.

5 strategies to encourage eating well

It is so hard to find straightforward advice on how to eat healthy. How many times has chocolate or red wine bounced between "healthy" and "unhealthy?" Going on Google to find answers on what to eat is overwhelming to say the least! But, there are some key things for you to keep in mind when it is time to go food shopping. In the next pages, you will read different strategies that will signal if something is healthy or unhealthy.

1. Would my Grandmother recognize this?

When picking up something at the store, ask yourself this: Would my own grandmother recognize this as "food?" Does the product claim "all natural" or "made of real fruit juices?" If so, be critical of that product. Remember, natural foods just exist. They do not have added ingredients.

2. Check the label.

Always look at the nutrition label. Be very careful of products with more than 5 ingredients. Food manufacturers often add extra and unnecessary ingredients that offer little nutritional value or are unhealthy! Ask yourself this: Can I pronounce the ingredients? If you cannot, then you may consider not buying that product. Always keep in mind that synthetic ingredients made by a chemist do not offer high nutritional value.

3. Look for sugar.

If sugar, sometimes called high fructose corn syrup or sucrose, is one of the first three ingredients then you should consider putting that product down.

4. Avoid shopping in center aisles.

Most of the time, natural foods, like produce, meat, and dairy are kept on the store's edges – not in the central aisles. Most of the unnatural, processed foods are going to be found in the center aisles. Consider this, you do not see ingredient lists in the produce section where all the fruits and vegetables are found. But, you do see ingredient lists when shopping the center aisles. Try spending more time shopping the store's perimeter than in the store's center aisles.

5. Eat your plants!

Strawberries, spinach, pineapple, apples, oranges, cucumber, tomatoes, avocados, onions, blueberries, watermelon, carrots, and peppers are ALL plants! Plants are super nutritious for you because each one is a natural food. Eating fruits and vegetables is a great way to satisfy your nutritional needs.

Eat well on a budget

Natural foods can be expensive.
It is frustrating that healthier, natural foods cost more than unnatural food.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which gives funds for buying more natural and nutritious foods. SNAP can also be used outside of grocery stores. Did you know that farmers markets in Georgia will double your SNAP dollar?

Links and Resources

Supplemental Food and Nutrition Services (SNAP):
A program that offers food-purchasing assistance for families.
www.fns.usda.gov/snap

Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP):
A program connected to WIC that provides fresh and locally grown fruits and vegetables and nutrition education to people participating in WIC.
www.fns.usda.gov/fmnp

Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP):
A program connected to SNAP that provides lower income seniors with access to locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey and herbs.
www.fns.usda.gov/sfmnp

Shop Healthy on a Budget:
Contains links to programs that will help supplement your food budget.
www.eatright.org/food/planning-and-prep/smart-shopping/shop-healthy-on-a-budget