



NUTRI-BYTES[©]

The Nutrient-Density Approach to Healthy Eating

What is the nutrient-density approach to healthy food choices?

The term *nutrient density* (the ratio of nutrients to calories) has been used in the scientific community for several years. The nutrient-density approach sends a positive message about enjoying foods that are abundant in nutrients, rather than focusing on the restriction of specific foods or nutrients. Consumers are advised to **choose a variety of nutrient-dense foods and beverages** – those that provide generous amounts of nutrients (e.g., vitamins, minerals, fiber, protein, and unsaturated fat) and relatively few calories. MyPyramid states this recommendation as “Get the most nutrition out of your calories.”

Is the nutrient-density approach scientifically sound?

Leading scientific and health organizations such as the American Dietetic Association, American Diabetes Association, and American Heart Association support the nutrient density approach as a way to choose healthy foods. In addition, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines and MyPyramid dietary recommendations (www.mypyramid.gov) are based on the concept of nutrient density. This approach looks at the overall nutritional quality of the food, rather than only one or two nutrients.

Are nutrient-dense foods important in everyone’s diet?

For health promotion and disease prevention, it’s important for *everyone* to consume an adequate amount of nutrients while controlling calories. Although many Americans eat more than enough calories, most persons do not meet their nutrient requirements. Not only are nutrients important for providing the building blocks, enzymes, and energy to live, but we are discovering more about their role in preventing chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

How do I follow the nutrient-density approach to healthy diets?

When you are choosing foods, remember to **choose nutrient-dense foods first** and then, if your calorie needs have not been met, foods with lower nutrient density. This principle is especially important if you are trying to achieve and maintain a healthy weight – be sure to build your diet with healthy, nutrient-rich foods while staying within your calorie allowance. Examples of nutrient-dense foods include brightly colored fruits and vegetables, whole grain cereals and breads, poultry, fish, beans, nuts, and skim or low-fat milk, cheese, and yogurt.

Stay tuned for more developments!

Several scoring systems have been developed to rank foods according to their nutrient density. The nutrient density index/score is based on the calorie and key nutrient content of the food item, with higher scores indicating greater nutrient density. Hopefully, someday food labels will carry a simple, easy-to-understand nutrient density score that will help consumers make healthy food choices in the supermarket.