Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide

User Information

Government of the Virgin Islands
Ministry of Health and Social Development

Your Roadmap to Healthier Eating

Call Us at
+1284-468-2278

Public Health Unit
Food & Nutrition

Table of Contents

Acronyms 4

Acknowledgements 5

Preface 6

Introduction: What is the Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide? 7

The Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide 9

5 Main Groups 10

Virgin Islands Dietary Guidelines 11

Promoting Food Sustainability 13

Using the Eatwell Guide 15

Portion Control 17

Fruits & Vegetables 19

Starchy Carbohydrates & Grains 22

Table of Contents

Animal Protein & Alternatives	26
Dairy & Alternatives	30
Fats & Oils	33
Water & Beverages	38
Foods High in Fat, Salt & Sugar	41
Dining Out	42
Healthy Eating Through The Lifespan	43

Acronyms

BVIHSA	British Virgin Islands Health Services Authority
DOAF	Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
EWG	Eatwell Guide
FS	Food Sustainability
NCD	Non- Communicable Chronic Disease
MHSD	Ministry of Health and Social Development
TFA	Trans-Fatty Acid
UKHSA	United Kingdom Health Security Agency
VI	Virgin Islands

Acknowledgements

The Ministry of Health and Social Development acknowledges the work of the Advisory and Technical Working Group, whose recommendations informed the development of this edition of the Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide and Dietary Guidelines. The Ministry also acknowledges the contributions and support from the public health staff and external individuals who provided their expertise to consult on and review the production of this document.

Advisory & Technical Working Group

The development of the Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of key technical agencies dedicated to promoting public health and nutrition. We extend our sincere appreciation to the following organizations for their expertise, guidance, and support::

- UK Health Security Agency
- Public Health Unit
- BVI Health Services Authority
- Department of Agriculture and Fisheries

Their commitment to enhancing health and well-being in the Virgin Islands has played a crucial role in shaping this guide, ensuring it serves as a valuable resource for individuals, families, and communities.

Preface

Message from the Chief Medical Officer

Dear Virgin Islanders, Visitors, and Residents,

It is my privilege to introduce you to the Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide, a vital tool designed to help everyone make healthier food choices and improve their overall well-being.

This guide provides practical advice on maintaining a balanced diet by emphasizing the importance of consuming various foods in the right proportions. It is tailored to reflect our community's unique cultural, culinary, and nutritional needs, ensuring that we preserve our heritage while striving for healthier lifestyles.

The health of our territory depends on the steps we take today to prevent chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, which are on the rise both globally and here at home. The Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide is more than just a tool, it is an investment in our collective health and a step towards building a stronger, more vibrant community.

I encourage every Virgin Islander to use this guide as part of their daily lives, whether you are planning meals at home, eating out, or shopping for groceries. Together, we can create a healthier future for ourselves, our families, and generations to come.

Yours in good health,

Dr. Ronald Georges
Chief Medical Officer (Ag)
Public Health Unit
Ministry of Health and Social Development
Government of the Virgin Islands

Eatwell Guide: How to eat a healthy balanced diet

What is the Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide?

The Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide (VI EWG) outlines the Ministry of Health and Social Development's (MHSD) guidelines and recommendations for healthy eating. The guide supports the dietary guidelines, whose main objectives are to promote and maintain healthy eating and overall nutritional well-being across the lifespan. It provides evidence-based recommendations on healthy eating patterns while advocating for improvements to the food environment in the VI.

These guidelines will serve as a framework for developing nutrition policies, programmes, and educational resources for the VI population aged two years and older. The goal is to promote long-term well-being and alleviate the burden of diet-related chronic diseases.

The EWG visually represents how different foods and drinks contribute to a healthy and balanced diet. It illustrates the types of foods and drinks that can be consumed—and in what proportions—over the course of a day or week (not necessarily at every meal). Accompanying the guide are recommendations designed to encourage healthy eating patterns throughout the lifespan.

While these recommendations are based on evidence-based data, it is important to acknowledge that they are not a one-size-fits-all approach. The EWG provides a customizable framework that individuals can adapt to meet their personal and cultural preferences.
Although the ultimate responsibility for food choices rests with individuals; health professionals, businesses, communities, organizations, and the government play a vital role in providing the support needed to empower families to make informed choices that align with the EWG and its recommendations.

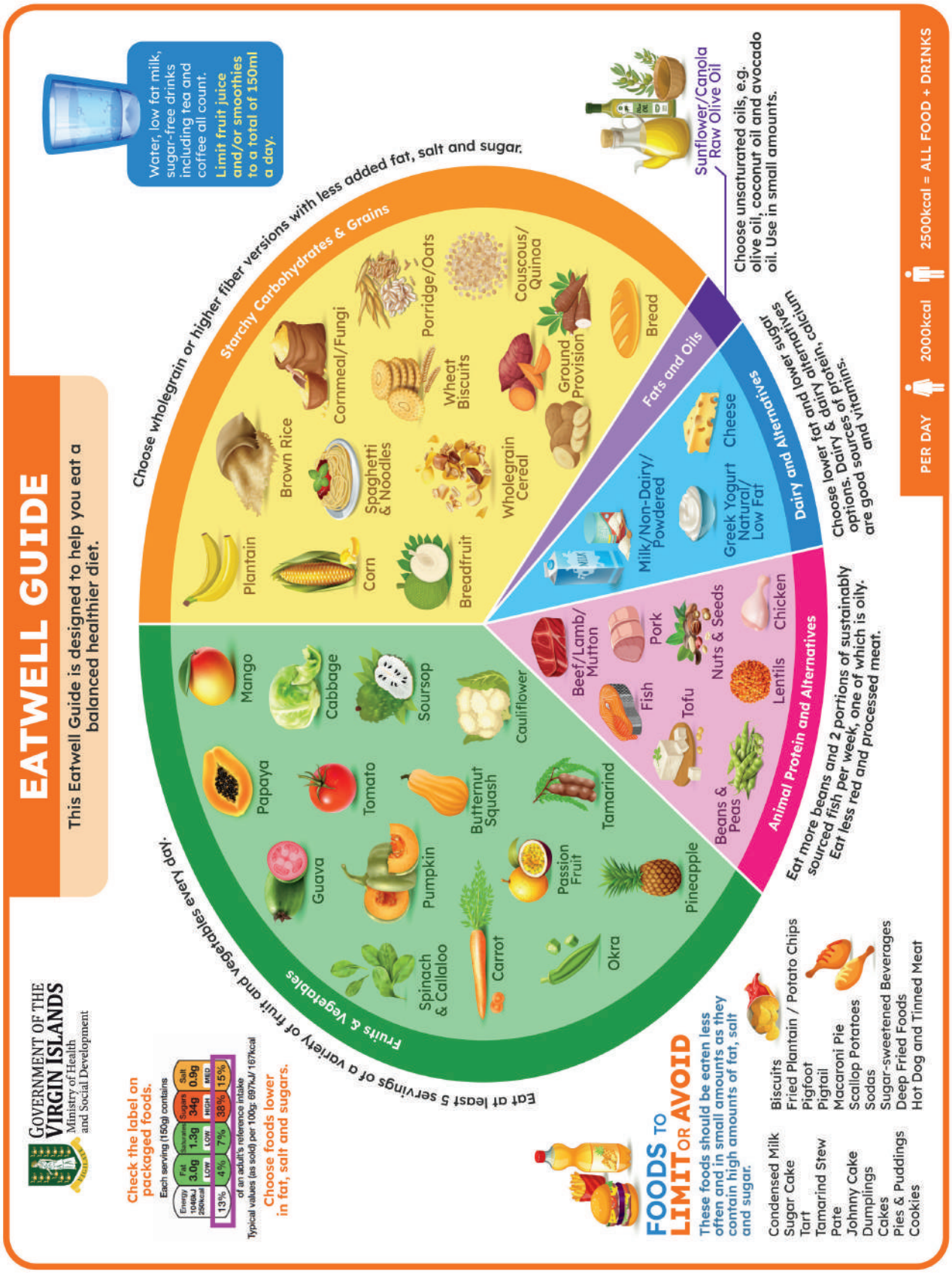
While the EWG is designed to empower individuals to make healthy food choices, it can also be used alongside the dietary guidelines as a tool to help health professionals and policymakers make evidence-based decisions when developing policies and nutrition programmes. The MHSD, together with other key stakeholders, will collaborate to update and release the VI Dietary Guidelines and the EWG every five years, with each edition reflecting the latest nutrition evidence.

What people eat and drink has a significant impact on their health. In the VI, more than half of all adults have one or more preventable non-communicable chronic disease (NCD), many of which are linked to poor diets and sedentary lifestyles. Given the high rates of chronic disease in the territory, the science underpinning the EWG and Dietary Guidelines has been examined through the lens of health promotion and disease prevention.

Priority has been placed on studies that explore the relationship between diet and health across all life stages, in men, women, and children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, whether healthy or at risk of chronic disease. This scientific foundation ensures that the EWG is relevant to all Virgin Islanders and serves as a valuable tool for health professionals, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Regardless of their current health status, all Virgin Islanders can benefit from making changes to what they eat and drink to build a healthier diet.

The VI Eatwell Guide is your roadmap to a healthier lifestyle, emphasizing balance and variety in every meal.

The Virgin Islands Eatwell Guide



5 Main Groups

The EWG divides the foods and drinks the VI population consume into 5 main groups. Individuals should try to adhere to the recommendations and choose a variety of foods from each group to help get the nutrients needed to stay healthy.

Fruits & Vegetables

Eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruits and vegetables each day.

Starchy Carbohydrates & Grains

Choose whole grain versions more often and where possible and high fibre grains.

Animal Protein & Alternatives

Eat some beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins (including 2 portions of fish every week, one of which should be oily)

Dairy & Alternatives

Have some dairy or dairy alternatives; choose lower-fat and lower-sugar options

Fats & Oils

Choose unsaturated fats and oils and eat them in small amounts

Drink 6-8 cups/glasses of water a day.
If consuming foods and drinks high in fat, salt or sugar- have these less often and in small amounts.

BVI Dietary Guidelines

The Eatwell Guide supports eight overarching dietary guidelines that promote healthy eating at each stage of life.

1. Enjoy a wide variety of nutrient-dense foods and beverages
2. Follow a healthy dietary pattern throughout the entire lifespan
3. Engage in physical activity to achieve and maintain a healthy weight
4. Limit processed or prepared foods and beverages that are higher in saturated fat added sugars and sodium
5. Avoid or limit alcohol intake to no more than 14 units a week to reduce risk of some chronic diseases
6. Encourage and support breastfeeding
7. Encourage food safety practices
8. Food preparation skills are needed to understand the food environment and promote healthy eating

The recommendations are intended for the population to use with the Eat Well Guide to develop healthy eating patterns; while the dietary guidelines were developed for government policymakers, health professionals (including dietitians, nutritionists, general practitioners, nurses and lactation specialists), educators, the food industry and other interested parties to assist in making nutrition policies intervention programmes and education resources for the VI population.

Who Should Follow These Recommendations?

These recommendations apply to most people ages 2 years and older regardless of their:

- weight
- dietary restrictions or preferences
- ethnic origin

If you have special dietary or medical needs, ask a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN/RD) or Registered Nutritionist (RNutr) about the best way to adapt this guide to your needs.

Eating well isn't about restrictions; it's about making informed choices that nourish both body and mind.

Promoting Food Sustainability Through the Eatwell Guide

Food sustainability (FS) involves ensuring that the way the population produce, consume, and manage food waste today supports the health of future generations, protects the environment, and enhances community well-being. The EWG can play a crucial role in promoting sustainable eating habits that benefit both personal health and the planet.
Here are the seven areas the VI EWG will focus on to promote FS.

Prioritize Local Foods

Eating locally-grown and seasonal produce reduces the carbon footprint associated with transporting food over long distances. It also supports local farmers and the VI economy.

Emphasize Plant-Based Foods

Diets rich in plant-based foods have a lower environmental impact. Producing fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes requires fewer resources, such as water and land, compared to meat and dairy.

Reduce Food Waste

Reducing food waste is one of the most effective ways to lower the environmental impact of food production. Less food waste means fewer resources are wasted, and it contributes to food security.

Support Sustainable Seafood Choices

Overfishing and unsustainable fishing practices are depleting the world's fish stocks. Choosing sustainable seafood ensures that marine ecosystems remain healthy for future generations.

Opt for Whole Foods Over Processed Foods

Processed foods often require more resources, such as packaging and energy for production, contributing to environmental degradation. Whole foods typically have less environmental impact and offer more nutritional benefits.

Promote Environmentally Friendly Cooking and Eating Habits

Simple changes in how we cook and eat can reduce environmental impact. Using energy-efficient appliances, reducing water waste, and conserving resources all contribute to a more sustainable food system.

Encourage Education on Food Origins and Impacts

Understanding where food comes from and its environmental impact empowers people to make better choices. Awareness of sustainable farming, fishing, and food production methods helps foster a connection between food and sustainability.

With the VI Eatwell Guide, healthy eating becomes simple, attainable, and most importantly, sustainable.

Using the Eatwell Guide

The EWG strives to meet individuals where they are- from personal preferences to cultural and budgetary considerations. With the exception of breastmilk (for the first 6 months of life), no single food can provide all the nutrients needed to meet nutritional needs. The guide divides foods and drinks consumed into 5 main food groups. Individuals can use this guide to help make healthier choices when:

- ✓ **planning what to eat**
- ✓ **cooking or preparing a meal at home**
- ✓ **food shopping**
- ✓ **eating out or on the go**

Most of the meals consumed are a combination of food groups. When planning meals, think about how the main ingredients fit within the 5 main food groups. An effort must be made to have a variety of food from each of the groups in order to get a wide range of nutrients.

It is important to include some fat in the diet; however, certain foods that are high in fat, salt, and sugar have been placed outside the main EWG, as they are not necessarily part of a healthy and balanced diet, and most individuals need to reduce their intake of these foods. Unsaturated fats from plant sources (e.g., vegetable oil and olive oil) are healthier types of fat, but all fats are high in energy (calories) and should be consumed in small amounts.

Many of the foods eaten such as pizza, chicken/meat/peas soup, sandwiches, pasta dishes etc., are combination foods and contain ingredients from more than one of the food groups. For these dishes, work out the main ingredients and determine how they would fit in the sections of the guide. Let us take a look at the following example.

Dish	Main Ingredients	Food Group
Shepard's Pie	**Mashed potato** • Potato • Milk • Butter	• Potato, bread. rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates • Dairy and alternatives • Oils & Spreads
	Ground Meat	Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins
	Mixed vegetables Onion Sweet peppers	Fruits and vegetables

On average, women should have around 2,000 calories a day (8,400 kilojoules) and men should have around 2,500 calories a day (10,500 kilojoujles). We all need different amounts of energy or calories from food to be a healthy weight. How much you need depends on a variety of factors, including how active you are.

Portion Control

Portion control is key to maintaining a healthy diet and preventing overeating. Eating the right amount of food helps balance calorie intake with energy needs, supporting weight management and overall health. Over time, portion sizes in restaurants and at home have increased significantly, often leading to unintentional overeating. Learning to recognize and manage portion sizes ensure individuals consume the appropriate amount of food for their body needs."

Importance of Measuring Utensils

Measuring utensils, such as measuring cups, spoons, and kitchen scales, play a crucial role in portion control. They help ensure that persons consume the right amount of food, which is important for maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle. Here is why portion control using measuring utensils are important.

Helps Maintain a Healthy Diet

Using measuring utensils helps ensure that people eat the correct portion sizes, preventing both overeating and undereating. Maintaining balanced portions allows individuals to get the necessary nutrients without consuming excess calories

Supports Weight Management

Portion control helps manage weight by preventing excessive calorie intake. Using measuring tools ensures that persons are eating appropriate serving sizes, which can help with weight loss or maintaining a healthy weight.

Reduces Food Waste

When food is measured correctly, the right amount is prepared, thus reducing leftovers and food waste. This is good for both household budget and the environment.

Helps with Blood Sugar and Heart Health

Proper portion sizes help regulate blood sugar levels, which is especially important for people with diabetes. Controlling portions of high-fat or high-sodium foods can also support heart health.

Encourages Mindful Eating

Measuring food makes persons more aware of what and how much they are eating. This promotes healthier eating habits and prevents mindless snacking or overindulging.

Ensures Recipe Success

Measuring ingredients properly ensures that recipes turn out as expected, whether baking or cooking. This enhances the taste and texture of meals while keeping them balanced.

By using measuring utensils for portion control, people can enjoy their meals in the right amounts, stay healthy, and make the most of their food!

Healthy eating, made simple! The VI Eat Well Guide is here to help you make the best choices for your well-being.

Fruits & Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are essential components of a healthy diet due to their numerous health benefits and rich nutritional profiles. In addition to being excellent sources of vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber, they play a crucial role in maintaining a healthy gut, supporting weight management, preventing digestive issues, boosting the immune system, and reducing the risk of chronic diseases.

How much should I eat?

Most people know the importance of eating more fruits and vegetables, yet many still do not consume enough. Fruits and vegetables should make up about one-third of your daily diet. To maximize their nutritional benefits and support optimal health and well-being, aim to include a colorful variety of them in your meals and snacks. For a balanced diet, prioritize vegetables over fruit to enhance nutrient intake while reducing added sugar consumption.

Portion Sizes

One portion of fruit and vegetables is 80g:

- 80g of fresh, canned or frozen fruit and vegetables count as one portion of a person's 5 A Day. For canned fruit and vegetables, choose those in natural juice or water, with no added sugar or salt.

- 30g of dried fruit (this is equivalent to around 80g of fruit) counts as one portion of 5 A Day. However, dried fruit can be high in sugar and bad for your teeth. To reduce the risk of tooth decay, dried fruit should be made as part of a meal - eg dessert- and not an in-between snack.

- Follow the 2:1 Ratio Rule : Aim to have twice as many vegetables than fruit on the plate. This will further boost nutrition while managing sugar intake.

- Be aware of fruits with a higher sugar content and have in moderation.

A small glass (150ml or ⅔ cup or 5 ounces) of unsweetened 100% fruit juice, fruit smoothie and vegetable juice:

- Counts as a maximum of one portion of a person's 5 A Day- no matter how much is consumed.

- Smoothies include any drink made up of any combination of fruit or vegetable juice, purée, or all the edible pulped fruit or vegetable.

- Crushing fruit and vegetables into juice and smoothies releases the sugars they contain, which can damage teeth. Juices and smoothies should be consumed at mealtimes, not as a between-meal snack, to reduce the risk of tooth decay.

- Whole fruits are less likely to cause tooth decay because the sugar is contained within the structure of the fruit.

- Watch out for drinks that say "juice drink" on the pack as they are unlikely to count towards a person's 5 A Day and can be high in sugar.

A balanced diet is the foundation of good health, and the VI Eatwell Guide empowers you to make smarter food choices every day.

The guide below suggests typical portion sizes of some common fruits and vegetables.

Type of Food	Portion SIze	What it looks like
Medium size fruit (Apple, pear, orange banana, star apple, sugar apple, mango-kidney, grafted)	80g	1 fruit (The size of a clenched fist)
Grapes, Cherries	80g	½ cup or 10-12 grapes or one handful
Blueberries	80g	½ cup or 15-20 berries
Small size fruit (plum, apricot, kiwi, clementine, guava, fig)	80g	2 fruits
Dried fruit (raisins, apricots, prunes etc)	30g	2 tablespoons
Cherry tomatoes	80g	7-8 tomatoes
Raw leafy vegetables (lettuce, cabbage, spinach, kale)	80g	2 heaped handfuls
Root vegetables (carrots, swede, beetroot)	80g	1/2 cup

Starchy Carbohydrates & Grains

Starchy food or staples make up a significant part of the diet. Making up just over a third of our diet, these foods contribute a significant amount of energy and essential nutrients including dietary fibre. Choose foods that are higher in fibre and wholegrain varieties when purchasing wholewheat pasta and brown rice or leaving the skin on potatoes. It is a common misconception that starchy foods are fattening but gram for gram, it contains less than half the calories of fat. There must be great attention when cooking to ensure that excess fat is not added as it will increase the calorie content.

Why Choose Wholegrain

Whole-grain foods are important for a healthy diet as they provide fibre, vitamins, minerals and other nutrients. Besides being nutrient-dense, whole grain foods contribute towards heart, gut and intestinal health, blood glucose control, weight management and overall long-term health. Whole grains also typically require less processing than refined grains and have a low environmental impact making them more food sustainable. Some examples of whole-grain foods include barley, bulgar (cracked wheat), farro, millet, quinoa, black rice, brown rice, red rice, wild rice, oatmeal, popcorn, whole wheat flour, whole-grain breakfast cereals, and whole wheat bread, pasta or crackers.

Starchy Food and Fibre

Dietary fibre, also known as roughage or bulk, is the part of plant foods that the body cannot digest or absorb. Unlike fats, proteins, or carbohydrates, which the body breaks down and absorbs, fibre passes through the stomach, small intestine, and colon almost unchanged. Fibre helps keep the digestive system healthy, preventing constipation and helps to maintain a healthy weight.

Most people have likely heard that fiber helps maintain regular bowel movements—and it does! Drinking plenty of water, staying active, and consuming fiber-rich foods such as wholegrain cereals and wholemeal pasta can help prevent constipation.

This is because fibre, especially from cereals like wheat, adds bulk to stools by soaking up water. This makes stool softer and helps it to move through the gut faster, making it easier to pass.

What About Starchy Vegetables?

Starchy vegetables have a higher starch content and are therefore higher in carbohydrates and calories than non-starchy vegetables. They are also high in vitamins minerals and antioxidants. Because of their higher starch content, they are nutritionally classified as starchy foods and do not count towards a person's 5 A Day. Starchy vegetables include white potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, plantain, turnip, green banana, cassava, yam, breadfruit and other ground provisions.

How Much Should I Eat?

Starchy foods should make up just over a third of food intake. Individuals should base each meal around these:

Wherever possible, choose whole grain foods as they are:

- higher in fibre and nutrients
- digested more slowly and so will keep you feeling full for longer

Some whole grain foods include:

- Wholewheat or whole grain bread (including pita and chapati)
- Oats
- Brown rice
- Whole wheat pasta

When preparing these foods, limit the amount of added fat by using unsaturated oils (olive or sunflower) or lower-fat spreads.

Eating from all the food groups in the right proportions is key to a balanced diet, and the VI Eatwell Guide shows us how.

The guide below suggests typical portion sizes of some common starchy foods.

Type of Food	Portion SIze	What it looks like
Rice	75g uncooked/ 150g cooked	4-5 tablespoons uncooked/ 2-3 tablespoons cooked
Pasta	75 g uncooked/ 180 g cooked	5-6 tablespoons uncooked/ 2-3 tablespoons cooked
Fungi	150g	3/4 cup
Plantain (fried)	80g	1/2 cups (4 slices)
Potato (boiled or baked)	180g	1 1/4 cups (1 medium potato)
Cassava (boiled)	80g	1/2 cup (2-3 pieces)
Porridge (eg. cream of wheat, oats)	40g uncooked/ 200g cooked	1/2 cup uncooked/ 1 1/2cups cooked
Breakfast cereal (eg, cornflakes)	40g	2-3 tablespoons
Slice bread (medium slice)	40g	1 slice
Dumb/ Coconut Bread	70g	1 slice

Animal Protein & Alternatives

These foods are essential components of a healthy and balanced diet. They are excellent sources of protein, vitamins, and minerals, all of which are vital for the body's growth, repair, and overall well-being. It is recommended that individuals should eat 2-3 portions a day and at least 2 portions of fish a week; one of which should be oily.

Importance of These Foods

Protein Source:

- These foods provide high-quality protein, which is crucial for muscle growth and tissue repair. Protein also plays a key role in the production of enzymes and hormones, and helps maintain strong immunity.

Vitamins and Minerals:

- Iron: Found in red meat, pulses, and beans, iron is necessary for the formation of red blood cells and preventing anaemia.
- Vitamin B12: Mainly found in animal products like meat, fish, and eggs, this vitamin is important for brain function and the production of DNA.
- Omega-3 Fatty Acids: Fish, especially oily fish (e.g., salmon, mackerel), are rich in omega-3s, which support heart health, reduce inflammation, and improve brain function.
- Fibre: Pulses and beans are rich in fibre, which aids digestion and helps lower cholesterol levels.

Sustainable Energy:

- These foods help in maintaining steady energy levels, especially when combined with a balanced intake of carbohydrates and fats.

Practical Considertations

Incorporating these foods in a balanced and mindful way can help ensure a diet rich in essential nutrients that support overall health. Here are some key areas to take into consideration:

Variety:

- Eating a variety of protein sources helps ensure a broad spectrum of nutrients.
- Including plant-based proteins like beans, pulses, and tofu in the diet can reduce reliance on animal-based proteins, contributing to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly diet.

Cooking Methods:

- Choose healthier cooking methods such as grilling, steaming, or baking instead of frying to minimise added fats.
- Trim visible fat from meat and remove the skin from poultry to reduce saturated fat intake.

Sustainability and Cost:

- Beans, pulses, and eggs are cost-effective protein sources compared to meat and fish.
- When choosing fish, look for sustainably sourced options to protect marine life and ecosystems.

Health Considerations:

- Limit the intake of processed meats (e.g., ham, sausages) as they are high in salt and preservatives.
- Balance intake of red meat to avoid excessive saturated fat consumption, which can impact heart health.
- Consider plant-based alternatives, especially if you have dietary restrictions (e.g., vegetarian, vegan) or wish to lower your environmental footprint.
- Some seafood contain high in mercury levels (e.g. swordfish, shark, king mackerel, big eye tuna) which can affect the nervous system and brain development. These should be avoided by pregnant and brea.st-feeding women and young children.
- Choose canned fish in water instead of brine.
- Store and handle raw seafood, meat and poultry products safely to avoid cross contamination and food-borne illness.

How Much Should I Eat?

Beans and Pulses:

- Recommended portion: 3 heaped tablespoons (around 80g).
- Beans and pulses are low in fat, high in fibre, and can also count towards your 5-a-day fruit and vegetable target.

Fish:

- Aim for at least 2 portions of fish per week, including one portion of oily fish. One portion is around 140g (cooked weight).
- Oily fish includes salmon, sardines, mackerel, and trout.
- Canned fish 100g (1/2 small can)
- Shellfish (mollusks and crustaceans including shrimp, lobster, conch, whelks, crab) 80g (1/2 cup)

Meat:

- A portion of cooked meat is typically around 90g (for example, a small steak, one chicken breast, or two slices of roast meat).
- It's advisable to limit red and processed meat (e.g., bacon, sausages) to around 70g per day to reduce the risk of certain cancers.

Eggs:

- 1-2 eggs is considered a standard portion.
- Eggs are a versatile source of protein and essential nutrients like vitamin D, B12, and choline.

Nuts and Seeds:

- A portion is around 30g (a small handful).
- Nuts and seeds are a rich source of healthy fats and plant-based protein but are also calorie-dense, so portion control is important.

Healthy eating should be accessible to everyone, and the VI Eatwell Guide makes that possible with practical, everyday tips.

The guide below suggests typical portion sizes of some common protein foods.

Type of Food	Portion SIze	What it looks like
Cooked meat (beef, pork, lamb, mince, chicken, turkey)	100g	A deck of cards
Cooked white fish (cod, grouper, haddock, snapper) or canned fish	140g	Palm of hand
Cooked oily fish (salmon, mackerel, sardines)	140g	Palm of hand
Baked beans	80g	3 heaped tablespoons
Beans (kidney beans, butterbeans, black eyed beans)	80g	3 heaped tablespoons
Pulses (lentils, chickpeas	80g	3 heaped tablespoons
Soya/tofu, plant-based meat alternative	80g	4 tablespoons
Unsalted nuts or nut butter	30g	2 tablespoons or one handful
Egg	120g	2 medium eggs

Dairy & Alternatives

Dairy and dairy alternatives play an essential role in many diets, providing key nutrients and versatile options for people with various dietary preferences or restrictions.

Importance of Dairy

Dairy products, such as milk, cheese, and yogurt, are rich sources of:

- Calcium: Essential for strong bones and teeth.
- Protein: Important for muscle repair, immune function, and overall body growth.
- Vitamins and Minerals: Dairy is a good source of Vitamin D (fortified), Vitamin B12, potassium, and phosphorus.
- Healthy Fats: Full-fat dairy can provide healthy fats, which are crucial for brain function and energy.

Portion Size

- Milk: 1 cup (240 ml)
- Cheese: 1 ounce (28 g) of hard cheese (about the size of a thumb) or ½ cup (120 ml) of cottage cheese
- Yogurt: 1 cup (240 ml) of plain or Greek yogurt

Practical Considertations

Lactose Intolerance:

- Many people cannot digest lactose, the sugar in milk. Low-lactose or lactose-free dairy products are widely available.

Milk Allergy:

- Some people may also have an immune response to the proteins in milk. This is typically seen in young children but some people may develop a milk allergy as an adult.

Sustainability:

- Dairy farming has environmental impacts, including water use and greenhouse gas emissions. Choosing organic or locally-sourced dairy may lessen these concerns.

Full-Fat vs. Low-Fat:

- While full-fat dairy products can be more satiating, they also contain more saturated fats. Low-fat or fat-free options provide the same nutrients without the extra fat but may lack some flavors.

For individuals who are lactose intolerant, vegan, or have dairy allergies, dairy alternatives offer a wide range of plant-based options.

Dairy Alternatives

Importance of Dairy Alternatives

Dairy alternatives can provide many of the same nutrients as traditional dairy, though some require fortification:

Calcium:

- Many plant-based milks are fortified with calcium to match dairy products.

Protein:

- Soy milk and pea milk have comparable protein levels to cow's milk. Others, like almond milk, may be lower in protein.

Vitamins:

- Fortified plant-based alternatives can provide Vitamin D, B12, and riboflavin, similar to dairy.

Common Dairy Alternatives

Soy Milk
- High in protein, often fortified with calcium, Vitamin D, and Vitamin B12. It has a taste and texture close to cow's milk.

Almond Milk
- Low in calories and fat, but usually lower in protein. Often fortified with calcium and vitamins.

Oat Milk
- Creamy texture with a mild flavor, higher in carbohydrates but moderate in protein. Typically fortified with calcium.

Coconut Milk
- Rich and creamy, but higher in fats (especially saturated fats) and lower in protein. Fortified varieties are common.

Cashew, Pea, and Rice Milk
- These are additional options, each with varying textures and nutrient profiles.

Plant-Based Yogurts and Cheeses
- Made from nuts, soy, or coconut, they offer alternatives to traditional dairy products, but nutritional content varies widely.

Practical Considerations

Fortification
- When choosing dairy alternatives, look for fortified options to ensure they provide key nutrients like calcium, Vitamin D, and B12.

Added Sugars
- Many plant-based milks and yogurts contain added sugars. Choose unsweetened versions when possible.

Sustainability
- Some plant-based milks, like almond milk, have a significant environmental impact due to water usage. Oat milk and soy milk are generally considered more sustainable.

Allergies
- Nut-based alternatives (e.g., almond or cashew milk) should be avoided by individuals with tree nut allergies.

Fats & Oils

Fats and oils play an important role in adding flavor and texture to foods, while also providing essential fats. Choosing the right oils and spreads in the right portions is key to maintaining a balanced diet.

Difference Between Fats and Oils

- Oils are liquid at room temperature. They are extracted from plants, nuts, seeds, or fruits, such as olives, avocados, or sunflowers. Common examples include olive oil, canola oil, and coconut oil.
- Oils are mostly made up of unsaturated fat which is heart healthy and can help reduce bad cholesterol.
- Oils have lower smoke points are are more suitable for dressings and low heat cooking

- Fats are solid at room temperature.
- Fats are mostly derived from animal sources (e.g., butter, lard) but also found in some plants (coconut and palm).
- Fats are mostly made up of saturated fat which can increase cholesterol if consumed in excess.
- Fats are more stable at high temperatures and are more suitable for baking and frying.

Fat Composition

- Oils are primarily composed of unsaturated fats, which can be either monounsaturated (e.g. olive oil) or polyunsaturated (e.g. flaxseed or sunflower oil). Some oils, like coconut oil, contain higher levels of saturated fats.

- Monounsaturated fats (in olive, canola, and avocado oils) are considered heart-healthy and can lower bad cholesterol (LDL).
- Polyunsaturated fats (in sunflower, soybean, and flaxseed oils) include essential fatty acids like omega-3 and omega-6, which are important for heart and brain health.

- Fat and spreads can vary in fat content depending on their type.
- Butter: Contains more saturated fats (about 63%) and a small amount of cholesterol.
- Margarine: Contains more unsaturated fats and is often fortified with vitamins. However, some margarines may contain trans fats if they are made from partially hydrogenated oils.
- Nut butters: Contain a mix of unsaturated fats, protein, and sometimes added ingredients like sugar or salt.
- Plant-based spreads: Generally contain unsaturated fats and can be a healthier option if they don't contain trans fats.

Trans-fats

What are Trans Fats?

- Trans fatty acids (TFA) or trans fat are a type of unsaturated fat that can increase the risk of heart disease and other health issues. They are found in both natural and artificial forms:
  - Natural trans fats – Found in small amounts in dairy and meat from cows, sheep, and goats.
  - Artificial trans fats – Created through hydrogenation, a process that turns liquid oils into solid fats to improve shelf life and texture in processed foods.

- Consuming TFA has been strongly linked to:

❌ Increased LDL ("bad") cholesterol, raising the risk of heart disease.
❌ Lowered HDL ("good") cholesterol, reducing heart protection.
❌ Higher risk of stroke, type 2 diabetes, and inflammation
❌ Linked to obesity & weight gain → Trans fats interfere with metabolism and fat storage.

Where Are Trans Fats Found?

TFA are mainly found in:

- ✕ Processed and fast foods – Fried chicken, French fries (chips), pizza
- ✕ Baked goods – Cakes, cookies, pastries, doughnuts
- ✕ Margarine & shortening – Some brands still contain partially hydrogenated oils.
- ✕ Snack foods – Crackers, microwave popcorn chips.
- ✕ Processed meats – Some sausages and frozen meals

Always check food labels for "partially hydrogenated oils"—a sign of trans fats!

Choose foods labeled "low in saturated fat" and "zero trans fats", but still check the ingredients.

Portion Size

- Fat should make up no more than 35% of daily calories, with saturated fat under 10%.
- Typical serving sizes:
  - Vegetable, Olive, Rapeseed, or Sunflower Oil – 1 teaspoon (5g)
  - Coconut Oil – 1 teaspoon (5g)
  - Butter or Ghee – 1 teaspoon (5g)
  - Lard, Suet, or Dripping – 1 teaspoon (5g)
- Measure oils carefully rather than pouring directly to control intake.

Nutrition Considerations

- Oils, especially those rich in unsaturated fats (like olive, canola, and avocado oil), are considered healthier for heart health. They can help reduce bad cholesterol and lower the risk of heart disease when used in moderation.
- Oils are calorie-dense (about 120 calories per tablespoon), so portion control is important.

- The health impact of fats and spreads depends on their composition:
- Butter: High in saturated fats and calories, butter should be consumed in moderation due to its potential link to increasing LDL cholesterol and heart disease risk.
- Margarine: Some margarine products contain trans fats, which are harmful to heart health, though many modern varieties are now trans-fat-free and made with healthier unsaturated fats.
- Nut butters: These are rich in protein and healthy fats but can also be calorie-dense, so portion control is key. Choose natural versions without added sugars or hydrogenated oils.

Practical Considerations

- Shelf life: Oils typically have a longer shelf life when stored properly in a cool, dark place. Some oils, like flaxseed oil, need to be refrigerated to prevent them from going rancid.
- Butter and margarine are usually refrigerated to maintain texture and prevent spoilage. Nut butters may separate (oil rising to the top), and stirring before use may be required.
- Oils are versatile in cooking and are used for frying, sautéing, roasting, and as a base for dressings, marinades, or dips. They are typically used in cooking where a liquid fat is needed or as a finishing drizzle to enhance flavor.

- Certain oils like avocado oil and canola oil have high smoke points, making them suitable for frying or roasting. Other oils, like extra virgin olive oil and flaxseed oil, are better suited for low-heat cooking or cold applications (e.g., salad dressings).

- Spreads are most commonly used as a topping on bread, crackers, or toast, or as an ingredient in baking (e.g., butter or margarine in pastries). Some spreads, like nut butters or plant-based spreads, can also be used in sauces, smoothies, or dips.

- Cooking and baking: Butter and margarine are frequently used in baking to provide richness, texture, and flavor. Nut butters can be used in cooking, baking, and as a dip or snack ingredient.

The VI Eatwell Guide is more than a diet plan – it's a lifestyle approach to fueling your body with what it needs to thrive.

Water & Beverages

Drinking plenty of fluid is essential to keep the body hydrated and working properly.

How Much Should I Drink?

- You should aim to drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of water every day.
- The following fluids can be considered to increase hydration:
  - milk - choose lower fat options
  - tea and coffee - some specialty drinks (for example - lattes and mochas) can be high in fat and sugar
  - fruit juices and smoothies - up to 150ml (2/3 cup) counts towards your 5 a day. Some local beverages can be high in sugar.

- Your hydration need may change if you are:
  - pregnant or breastfeeding
  - in a hot environment
  - physically active for long periods
  - ill or recovering from illness
  - Elderly

Pratical Considrations

- Drink regularly throughout the day
- Swap sugary drinks for diet, sugar-free or no added sugar drinks
- Adults can choose lower fat milk, such as semi-skimmed, 1% fat or skimmed milk and unsweetened plant-based drinks
- Limit fruit juice and smoothies to a maximum of one small glass (150ml or 2/3 cup) a day
- Check nutrition labels on drinks

- Drink extra fluids if sweating from physical activity, or unwell – water is the best way to replace lost fluids.
- Some local beverages can be too sugary- dilute with water to reduce sugar content.
- Drink caffeine in moderation – some people are more sensitive to caffeine than others, depending on how much they drink and how often. Check the label for drinks that are high in caffeine.
- If pure water is disliked, try sparkling water, or add fruits and herbs for flavour.
- The color of the urine can be a good indicator of hydration status. Pale yellow or light straw-colored urine typically signs of proper hydration, while darker urine can be a sign of dehydration.
- Water rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, soups and broths can also add to fluid intake.

Sports Drinks

Sports drinks are designed to help athletes and active individuals rehydrate, replenish electrolytes, and maintain energy levels. However, they are not always necessary for everyone.

Sports drinks typically contain:

- Water – for rehydration.
- Electrolytes (Sodium, Potassium, Magnesium, Calcium) – to replace minerals lost in sweat.
- Carbohydrates (Sugars like glucose, sucrose, or fructose) – to provide quick energy.
- Flavors & Coloring – often added for taste and appeal.

Recommended for:

- High-intensity exercise lasting longer than 60 minutes (e.g., endurance running, cycling, football).
- Hot & humid conditions where excessive sweating occurs.
- Athletes needing quick energy replacement during intense workouts.
- Post-workout recovery when rapid hydration and glycogen replenishment are needed.

Not necessary for:

- Light workouts (under 60 minutes) – Water is usually sufficient.
- Sedentary individuals or casual exercisers – Sports drinks add unnecessary sugar and calories.
- Weight management goals – High sugar content can contribute to excess calorie intake

Alcohol

Alcohol contains a lot of calories and can be health damaging if too much is consumed too often.

- The calorie content of an alcoholic drink depends on the:
  - type of alcohol
  - type of mixer (if used)
  - volume served
- As a guide:
  - a pint of beer (5%) contains 182 calories and 2.3 units of alcohol
  - a medium glass of wine (175ml, 13%) contains 159 calories and 2.3 units of alcohol
  - a bottle of alcopop (275ml, 4%) contains 170 calories and 1.1 units of alcohol
  - a single measure of spirits (25ml, 40%) contains 61 calories and 1 unit of alcohol

- You should limit the amount you drink to no more than 14 units spread evenly throughout the week.
- Pregnant women should refrain from drinking alcohol.

Alcohol and Medication

Consuming alcohol while taking medication can have serious health implications. Persons should be informed and cautious when using alcohol along with prescribed or over-the-counter medications.

- Avoid alcohol when taking medications that can cause drowsiness, dizziness, or affect coordination.
- Always read labels and consult with a healthcare provider or pharmacist before drinking alcohol while on medication.
- Alcohol can interfere with the effectiveness of certain medications or increase the risk of side effects, including liver damage or gastrointestinal issues.

Incorporating the VI Eatwell Guide into your life is a step toward long-term wellness and vitality.

Foods High in Fat, Salt & Sugar

Foods and drinks that are high in fat, TFA, salt or sugar and low in nutritional value are known as 'discretionary foods'. These aren't required for a healthy balanced diet.

This includes:

- chocolate and sweets
- cakes, biscuits and pastries
- sugary drinks
- savoury snacks
- Johnny cake and pate
- special
- deep fried foods
- savoury dishes such as macaroni pie, scalloped potatoes
- pigtail, pigfoot, bullfoot etc
- ready made/ frozen meals
- processed meat

These types of foods can be enjoyed sometimes and in small portions as part of a healthy diet. However, most people eat too much of these too often. This can lead to an increased risk of obesity, high blood pressure and tooth decay.

Dining Out

Eating out can be a great way to enjoy delicious food and socialize, but it's important to make smart choices to maintain a healthy diet. The EWG helps individuals make informed decisions when dining out while still enjoying their favorite meals.

Healthy Dining Out

Plan Ahead:

- Check the menu online before going to see if there are healthy options.
- Look for meals that include vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains.

✅ Watch Portion Sizes:

- Restaurant portions are often larger than recommended.
- Share a meal, ask for a half portion, or take leftovers home.

✅ Choose Healthier Cooking Methods:

- Choose grilled, baked, steamed, or roasted instead of fried.
- Avoid foods labeled "crispy," "fried," "battered," or "smothered", which often mean high fat, salt and calorie content.

✅ Be Mindful of Sugary Drinks & Alcohol:

- Choose water, fresh juice, or unsweetened beverages instead of sodas and sugary cocktails.
- Alcoholic drinks can add extra empty calories—drink in moderation.

✅ Balance Your Meal:

- Include a good mix of protein, healthy fats, and fiber to keep you full and energized.
- Ask for extra vegetables or a side salad instead of fries.

Healthy eating through the lifespan

The EWG is a practical tool that promotes healthy eating throughout the lifespan by providing guidelines on how to balance different food groups, ensuring that individuals of all ages receive the nutrients they need. Here's how it supports healthy eating at various stages of life:

Balanced Diet for All Ages

The EWG emphasizes the importance of a balanced diet made up of different food groups, including:

- Fruits and Vegetables (at least 5 portions a day)
- Carbohydrates (preferably whole grain or higher fiber varieties)
- Proteins (lean meat, fish, eggs, beans, pulses, and plant-based proteins)
- Dairy or Dairy Alternatives (for calcium and other nutrients)
- Oils and Spreads (in small amounts for healthy fats)

This balance provides essential nutrients, such as vitamins, minerals, fiber, and healthy fats, supporting proper growth, development, and maintenance of health across all life stages.

Growth and Development in Childhood

During childhood, the EWG supports:

- Adequate Nutrition for Growth: Ensuring that children consume a variety of foods helps them get enough energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals needed for healthy physical and cognitive development.
- Healthy Eating Habits: Introducing the principles of the Eatwell Guide early can help children develop positive eating habits, setting the foundation for lifelong health. Emphasizing fruits, vegetables, and whole grains encourages a preference for nutrient-rich foods over processed, sugary options.
- Calcium and Vitamin D: Dairy or fortified dairy alternatives provide calcium and Vitamin D, which are critical for bone development in children.

Adolescents and Increased Nutrient Needs

During adolescence, growth spurts and hormonal changes increase nutrient requirements. The EWG addresses these needs by:

- Protein for Muscle and Tissue Development: Emphasizing lean proteins helps meet the higher protein needs during adolescence.
- Iron for Growth and Blood Health: Teenagers, particularly girls, need more iron to support increased blood volume and prevent iron-deficiency anemia.
- Calcium and Vitamin D for Bone Health: Consuming enough dairy or fortified dairy alternatives ensures adequate calcium and vitamin D, supporting peak bone mass development.

Healthy Eating During Adulthood

For adults, the EWG focuses on:

- Maintaining a Healthy Weight: By emphasizing portion control and a balanced intake of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and healthy fats, the Guide helps adults maintain a healthy weight, reducing the risk of chronic diseases like obesity, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.
- Heart Health: The Guide promotes the consumption of unsaturated fats from plant oils, nuts, and seeds while limiting saturated fats and trans fats, which supports heart health and reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease.
- Fiber for Digestive Health: Whole grains, fruits, and vegetables provide fiber, which aids digestion and prevents constipation. Fiber also helps regulate blood sugar and cholesterol levels.

Pregnancy and Lactation

For pregnant and breastfeeding women, the EWG emphasizes:

- Folic Acid and Iron: The need for folic acid (to prevent neural tube defects) and iron (to support increased blood volume) is heightened during pregnancy. Including leafy greens, fortified cereals, and lean meats helps meet these requirements.
- Calcium for Bone Health: Dairy or dairy alternatives provide calcium, which is essential for the development of the baby's bones and teeth, as well as for maintaining the mother's bone health.
- Protein and Healthy Fats: Lean proteins and sources of healthy fats, like oily fish, support the growth and brain development of the baby.

Older Adults and Changing Nutrient Needs

As people age, nutrient needs change, and the EWG helps address these shifts by:

- Preventing Muscle Loss: Including enough protein-rich foods like lean meat, fish, eggs, beans, and legumes helps older adults preserve muscle mass, which naturally declines with age.
- Bone Health: Calcium and Vitamin D are critical for maintaining bone density and preventing osteoporosis. Dairy products or fortified dairy alternatives, along with vitamin D-rich foods like oily fish, are recommended.
- Maintaining a Healthy Weight: Older adults may need fewer calories but still require nutrient-dense foods. The Guide encourages smaller, nutrient-rich portions to help maintain a healthy weight while providing essential nutrients.
- Hydration: The Guide also promotes adequate fluid intake, especially important for older adults, as the sense of thirst can diminish with age, increasing the risk of dehydration.

Managing Chronic Conditions Across the Lifespan

The EWG promotes healthy eating patterns that can help manage or prevent chronic conditions like:

- Type 2 Diabetes: A diet rich in fiber, lean proteins, and healthy fats, with limited refined sugars, helps regulate blood sugar levels and manage diabetes.
- Cardiovascular Disease: By promoting the consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and unsaturated fats, the Guide supports heart health and lowers the risk of cardiovascular disease including hypertension or high blood pressure.
- Obesity: Encouraging portion control and the consumption of nutrient-dense foods supports healthy weight management and reduces the risk of obesity and its related health complications.

Flexibility for Cultural and Dietary Preferences

The EWG is flexible, allowing for a wide variety of foods to suit different cultural and dietary preferences. Whether following a vegetarian, vegan, or pescatarian diet, the Guide supports healthy eating patterns by offering alternatives for dairy, proteins, and fats.

The EWG is a versatile framework that promotes healthy eating at all stages of life by ensuring a balanced diet rich in essential nutrients. It supports healthy growth in children and adolescents, helps adults maintain their weight and reduce disease risks, and addresses the changing needs of older adults. By encouraging a balanced and sustainable approach to food choices, the Guide helps individuals make informed decisions that promote long-term health and well-being across the lifespan.

Nourish your body, support your community, and embrace local flavors with the guidance of the VI Eatwell Guide.

Virgin Islands Eat Well Guide (2025)
Public Health Unit (Food & Nutrition)
Ministry of Health and Social Development
Government of the Virgin Islands