

How much should a person eat each day?

A guide to daily nutrition amounts needed by adults with intellectual disability

The amount of food a person needs each day depends mainly on their body size, age, sex, and how physically active they are. This guide gives practical guidance on daily amounts for adults, organised by activity level, and shows how those amounts can be spread across the day through meals and snacks. All figures are approximate — individual needs vary and should be discussed with a dietitian if there are specific health concerns.

1

Daily energy needs by activity level

Sedentary	Moderately active	Very active
Little or no structured physical activity. Mostly sitting during the day.	Some regular physical activity – light exercise, walking or an active role at least 30-60 minutes most days.	Regular vigorous exercise or a physically demanding day – sustained activity for 60+ minutes daily.
• Working at a desk or in a workshop with no physical demands • Spending most of the day in a wheelchair or resting • Watching TV, using screens, light household duties	• Daily walks of 30 minutes or more • Supported gym sessions, swimming, or dance classes • Active tasks such as gardening or cleaning	• Supported sport training or competitive activity • Manual labour or highly physical supported employment • Multiple exercise sessions each week (gym, running, cycling)
Daily energy: 1,600 – 2,000 kcal/day	Daily energy: 2,000 – 2,400 kcal/day	Daily energy: 2,400 – 3,000 kcal/day

Note for support workers: These figures are general adult guidelines. People with intellectual disability may have different needs due to medications affecting appetite or metabolism, reduced muscle mass, limited mobility, or specific syndromes (e.g. Down syndrome tends toward lower energy needs; Prader-Willi syndrome requires careful calorie management). When in doubt, refer to a dietitian.

2 What each nutrient does – and how much is needed

Carbohydrates

WHAT IT DOES IN THE BODY

Main energy source for brain and muscles.
Choose wholegrains, vegetables and legumes over refined sugars and white flour products



DAILY TARGET

45-65% of daily energy
Sedentary: ~180-220 g
Moderate: ~225-300 g
Very active: ~300-400 g

BEST FOOD SOURCES

Oats, brown rice, wholegrain bread.
Potatoes, corn, legumes.
Fruit, milk, yoghurt

Protein

WHAT IT DOES IN THE BODY

Builds and repairs muscle, skin and organs.
Makes hormones, enzymes and antibodies.
Important for people with limited activity to maintain muscle mass.



DAILY TARGET

0.8-2.0 g per kg body weight per day
Sedentary: ~56-75 g (0.8-1.0 g/kg)
Moderate: ~85-100 g (1.2-1.4 g/kg)
Very active: ~110-140 g (1.6-2.0 g/kg)

BEST FOOD SOURCES

Meat, chicken, fish, eggs
Dairy – milk, yoghurt, cheese
Legumes – lentils, chickpeas, beans
Tofu, nuts, seeds

2 What each nutrient does – and how much is needed

Healthy fats

WHAT IT DOES IN THE BODY

Supports brain function and nerve health.
Carries fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, K)
Focus on unsaturated fats, limit saturated fats, and avoid trans fats entirely.



DAILY TARGET

20-35% of daily energy
Sedentary: ~50-65g
Moderate: ~60-80g
Very active: ~70-95g

BEST FOOD SOURCES

Olive oil, avocado
Oily fish – salmon, sardines, mackerel
Nuts and seeds.
Limit butter, cream, fried foods

Fibre

WHAT IT DOES IN THE BODY

Keeps bowels regular (important for people who are prone to constipation).
Feeds healthy gut bacteria.
Helps control blood sugar and cholesterol.



DAILY TARGET

25-38 g per day
Sedentary: ~25 g
Moderate: ~25-30 g
Very active: ~30-38 g
Increase gradually with fluids if not eating enough.

BEST FOOD SOURCES

Wholegrains – oats, wholemeal bread
Vegetables and legumes.
Fruit with skin where possible.
Nuts and seeds.

2 What each nutrient does – and how much is needed

Fluids (water)

WHAT IT DOES IN THE BODY

Helps regulate temperature, carries nutrients, removes waste. Prevents constipation, urinary infections and confusion.

DAILY TARGET

1.5-3.5 L per day (varies with activity and weather)

Sedentary: ~1.5-2 L

Moderate: ~2-2.5 L

Very active: 2.5-3.5 L

BEST FOOD SOURCES

Water is the best choice.

Low fat milk.

Herbal teas (no sugar)

Limit juice, cordial, soft drinks.

People may need prompts to drink.

Key micronutrients

WHAT IT DOES IN THE BODY

Vitamins and minerals are needed in small amounts but are essential. Most are covered by a varied diet.

Watch for iron, calcium, vitamin D, B12 and folate in restricted diets.



DAILY TARGET

Iron: 8-18 mg/day

Calcium: 1,000-1,300 mg/day

Vitamin D: 600-800 IU/day

B12: 2.4 mcg/day

Folate: 400 mcg/day

BEST FOOD SOURCES

Red meat, leafy greens (iron).

Dairy, fortified plant milk (calcium)

Sunlight, oily fish (vitamin D)

Meat, eggs, dairy (B12)

Leafy greens, legumes (folate)

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What does a balanced plate look like across the day?

A balanced day of eating spreads energy and nutrients across three main meals and one or two snacks. The proportions below show a typical healthy macro balance. Most energy should come from carbohydrates, with protein and fat making up the remainder. Daily targets can be met across three meals and two snacks. Fibre and fluid targets should be spread throughout the day rather than met all at once.

Adjust portions up or down for sedentary or very active individuals using the targets in section one.



Food group	Sedentary (~1,800 kcal)	Moderately active (~2,200 kcal)	Very active (~2,700 kcal)
Grains and starchy veg	4–5 serves/day	5–6 serves/day	7–9 serves/day
Vegetables	5 serves/day	5–6 serves/day	6+ serves/day
Fruit	2 serves/day	2 serves/day	2–3 serves/day
Protein foods	2–2.5 serves/day	2.5–3 serves/day	3–4 serves/day
Dairy or alternatives	2.5 serves/day	2.5–3 serves/day	3–3.5 serves/day
Healthy fats and oils	1–2 tsp/day	2–3 tsp/day	3–4 tsp/day
Water and fluids	1.5–2 L/day	2–2.5 L/day	2.5–3.5 L/day

Individual needs vary. These figures are based on general population guidelines (Australian Dietary Guidelines, Nutrient Reference Values for Australia and New Zealand). A person’s actual needs depend on age, sex, body size, health conditions, and medications. For people with intellectual disability with complex health needs, restricted diets, significant weight concerns, or dysphagia, a referral to an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is strongly recommended.