

There is, however, a catch-all “Other Foods” category for certain foods and food-like things that don’t fit in the ten main categories just described. Most sauces, condiments, and dressings, most energy and snack bars, and many highly processed foods made from originally healthy foods (e.g., rice milk) should be counted as other foods which are classified as “acceptable.”

Diet Quality Hierarchy/Agnostic Healthy-Eating Game Cheat Sheet

The following table summarizes the important points of the diet quality hierarchy as it relates to the agnostic healthy-eating game.

Type	Rank	Classification	Examples	Guidelines
Vegetables	1	Essential	Raw vegetables Cooked vegetables Salads Vegetable soups and purees Vegetable juices	Ideally: Eat more often than any other food type Minimally: Eat more often than anything except fruit
Fruits	2	Essential	Whole fruits Stewed fruits Applesauce Fruit smoothies 100% fruit spreads 100% fruit juices	Ideally: Eat more often than anything except vegetables Minimally: Same as Ideally
Nuts, Seeds, and Healthy Oils	3	Recommended	Peanuts (technically a legume), almonds, cashews, pine nuts, macadamia nuts, sunflower seeds, chia seeds, hemp seeds Nut butters (without sugar) Plant oils produced without chemical extractions	Ideally: Eat more often than anything except vegetables and fruit Minimally: Eat more often than any food type in the Acceptable category

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High-Quality Meat and Seafood	4	Recommended	Meat from grass-fed and free-range animals Organic meats Meats with less than 10% fat All fish Eggs	Ideally: Eat more often than anything except vegetables, fruits, and nuts, seeds, and healthy oils Minimally: Eat more often than any food type in the Acceptable category
Whole Grains	5	Recommended	Whole wheat, oats, barley, corn, brown rice, teff, amaranth, quinoa 100% whole-grain breads 100% whole-grain breakfast cereals 100% whole-grain pastas	Ideally: Eat more often than all low-quality food types and dairy Minimally: Eat more often than any food type in the Acceptable category
Dairy	6	Recommended	Whole, reduced-fat, and skim milk from cows, goats, and sheep Cheese Yogurt without added sugar Sour cream Cream cheese	Ideally: Eat more often than any food type in the Acceptable category Minimally: Same as Ideally
Refined Grains	7	Acceptable	Refined or enriched wheat flour White rice Breads made with less than 100% whole grains Breakfast cereals made with less than 100% whole grains Pastas made with less than 100% whole grains	Ideally: Eat less often than anything except low-quality meats, sweets, and fried foods Minimally: Eat less often than any food in the Essential and Recommended categories
Low-Quality Meat and Seafood	8	Acceptable	Most cold cuts Most processed meats (e.g., bacon) All meats that do not qualify as high-quality	Ideally: Eat less often than anything except sweets and fried foods Minimally: Eat less often than any food in the Essential and Recommended categories

Sweets	9	Acceptable	Candy Pastries Desserts Soft drinks Diet soft drinks Most energy bars Some breakfast cereals	Ideally: Eat less often than anything except fried foods Minimally: Eat less often than any food in the Essential and Recommended categories
Fried Foods	10	Acceptable	Snack chips French fries Fried chicken Donuts	Ideally: Eat less often than any other food type Minimally: Eat less often than any food in the Essential and Recommended categories

Playing the Game

The agnostic healthy-eating game is based entirely on the frequency with which different types of foods are eaten. When you begin to play this game, you will immediately confront the question of what constitutes an “occasion” of eating a particular type of food. Instead of relying on official serving sizes defined by the government or by product labels, I suggest you think in terms of normal portion sizes for you. Examples of normal portion sizes for most people are one cup of cooked vegetables, a whole piece of fruit, a small handful of nuts or seeds, a palm-size serving of meat or fish, two slices of bread, and an eight-ounce tub of yogurt.

Some servings should be counted as double or half portions. For example, I would count the onions, tomatoes, and mushrooms in an omelet as a half portion of vegetables (even though mushrooms are technically a fungus). A thirty-two-ounce soda I would count as two sweets.

Composite foods can be even trickier. How do you handle a few slices of pizza with pepperoni and olives? Use common sense to make these calls. The pizza crust I’d count as a refined grain, the tomato sauce and olives combined as a half portion of vegetables, the cheese as dairy, and the pepperoni as a low-quality meat.

Appendix A

Following are detailed guidelines for categorizing foods when playing the agnostic healthy-eating game.

Vegetables

This category includes whole, fresh vegetables eaten raw or cooked as well as canned and frozen vegetables and pureed or liquefied vegetables used in soups, sauces, and so forth. Legumes (peas, lentils, etc.) are also counted as vegetables.

Vegetable juices may be counted as a portion of vegetables once per day.

Fruits that are generally regarded as vegetables for culinary purposes—including tomatoes and avocados—may be counted as vegetables.

A composite food containing more than one type of vegetable may be counted as 1.5 or 2 servings of vegetables.

Generous amounts of vegetables on a sandwich may be counted as $\frac{1}{2}$ portion of vegetables. A little iceberg lettuce and a thin, pink tomato slice on a hamburger should not be counted at all.

Non-fried vegetable snack chips such as kale chips may be counted as $\frac{1}{2}$ portion of vegetables one time per day.

Plant-based powdered supplements such as Greens Plus also may be counted as $\frac{1}{2}$ portion of vegetables one time per day.

Tofu and other lightly processed soy products as well as other lightly processed foods made entirely or almost entirely from vegetables should be counted as $\frac{1}{2}$ serving of vegetables.

Spinach pasta and spinach tortillas should not be scored as vegetables. They should be counted as refined grains.

Typical serving sizes of vegetables include a fist-size portion of solid vegetables, ½ cup of tomato sauce, and a medium-size bowl of vegetable soup or salad.

Fruit

This category includes whole fresh fruits, canned and frozen fruits, cooked whole fruits, blended fruits, dried fruits, and foods made with whole fruits, such as applesauce.

Small amounts of fruit included in baked goods, packaged yogurt, etc. should not be counted at all.

One-hundred percent fruit juice should be counted as ½ portion of fruit. Juice products that are less than one-hundred-percent fruit juice and contain added sugars should be counted as sweets.

Fruit-based desserts such as peach cobbler may be double-scored as fruits and sweets.

Fruit-based products such as dried cranberries and applesauce that contain added sugar should be double-scored as fruits and sweets.

All processed-fruit snacks such as Fruit Rollups should be counted as sweets.

Foods that include multiple fruits, such as smoothies, may be counted as 1.5 to 2 servings of fruit.

Fruits such as tomatoes and avocados that are treated as vegetables in culinary tradition should be counted as vegetables.

Typical serving sizes of fruits include one medium-size piece of whole fruit (e.g., one banana), a handful of berries, and ½ cup of applesauce.

Nuts, Seeds, and Healthy Oils

This category includes cashews, almonds, walnuts, sunflower seeds, hemp-seeds, etc. Peanuts should be counted as nuts although they are technically legumes.

This category also includes non-chemically extracted plant oils consumed raw or cooked in small amounts. For example, an olive oil-based dressing on a salad is to be counted as a serving of healthy oil, as is grapeseed oil used to sauté vegetables.

Nut and seed butters made without sugar or other additives besides salt should be counted as nuts, seeds, and healthy oils. Those made with added sugar should be counted as sweets.

Typical serving sizes of nuts, seeds, and healthy oils include a handful of nuts, enough peanut butter to cover a slice of toast, and two tablespoons of salad dressing.

High-Quality Meat and Seafood

This category includes all meat from wild game (venison, pheasant, etc.), free-range fowl and poultry, and grass-fed cattle and lamb.

This category also includes non-processed lean cuts from non-wild/free range/grass-fed animals, as in these examples:

Beef

Eye of round, filet mignon, London broil, round roast, sirloin tip side steak, top round roast/steak, top sirloin, and 90 percent-plus lean ground beef

Chicken

All parts except skin and organs

Lamb

Lamb shoulder, leg of lamb, loin chops

Pork

Canadian-style bacon, extra-lean ham, loin roast, loin chop, tenderloin

Turkey

All parts except skin and organs

All forms of *wild-caught* fresh, frozen, and canned fish and shellfish are included in this category except American eel, Atlantic salmon (both wild and farmed), imported catfish, and imported shrimp (for reasons of contamination).

All products carrying the Marine Stewardship Council's "Fish Forever" label are to be counted as high-quality seafood.

Only those *farmed* seafood products that bear the Aquaculture Stewardship Council's "Responsibly Farmed" consumer label may be counted as high-quality seafood.

Typical serving sizes of high-quality meat and seafood include one hamburger patty and a palm-size piece of fish.

Whole Grains

This category includes whole wheat, buckwheat, barley, brown rice, corn, oats, amaranth, quinoa, spelt, bulgur, millet, rye, sorghum, and teff.

The whole-grains category also includes breads and other baked goods, pastas, and breakfast cereals made with 100-percent whole grains and no refined grains.

Whole-bean flours such as garbanzo bean flour may be counted as whole grains even though, technically, they are processed legumes.

Homemade popcorn counts as a whole grain. (Movie-theater popcorn, microwave popcorn, and bagged, ready-to-eat popcorn do not.)

Typical serving sizes of whole-grain foods include two slices of bread and a medium-size bowl of breakfast cereal.

Dairy

This category includes cow's milk, goat's milk, sheep's milk, cheese, yogurt, sour cream, cream cheese, cottage cheese, and butter.

Whole milk, low-fat milk, and skim milk products are all counted as dairy, but whole-milk dairy products are preferable.

All sweetened dairy products, including ice cream, frozen yogurt, sweet cream, chocolate milk, and yogurts containing some form of sugar as their second ingredient should be counted as sweets.

All "fake" milk and cheese products (soy milk, rice milk, tofu cheese, etc.) should be placed in the "Other Foods" category.

Typical serving sizes of dairy foods include the amount of milk you would normally use in a bowl of breakfast cereal, two slices of deli cheese, and a single-serving tub of yogurt.

Refined Grains

This category includes white rice, processed flours, and all breakfast cereals, pastas, breads, and other baked goods made with less than 100-percent whole grains.

Note that, in wheat-containing products, any description other than

“whole wheat,” “whole wheat flour,” or “whole grain wheat flour” indicates that the wheat is refined and the product should be counted as a refined grain.

Breakfast cereals containing more than 10 grams of sugar per serving should be counted as sweets, unless they contain dried fruit.

Whole-grain baked goods should be counted as sweets if they contain enough sugar to taste sweet.

Typical serving sizes of refined grains include a fist-size portion of white rice, a medium-size bowl of pasta or breakfast cereal, and two slices of bread.

Other Foods

This category includes all condiments, sauces, and gravies except those that are made from high-quality foods, such as guacamole, hummus, mustard, pesto, and salsa, which may be scored as $\frac{1}{2}$ portion of the food type they belong to. For example, salsa may be scored as $\frac{1}{2}$ portion of vegetables.

Beer, wine, and spirits after the first drink of the day should be counted as other Foods. The first drink should not be counted at all. Mixed drinks containing sugar should be counted as sweets.

Energy and snack bars are to be counted as other foods unless they are made exclusively from high-quality foods such as whole grains, nuts, and seeds.

This category also includes all processed fake dairy products and meats such as rice milk and tofu burgers.

All nutritional supplements including protein powders and meal replacements should be counted as other foods, except for plant-based powder supplements such as Greens Plus, which may be counted as $\frac{1}{2}$ portion of vegetables one time per day.

Low-Quality Meat and Seafood

This category includes all meats and seafoods that are not included in the high-quality meat and fish category.

All processed meats (sausage, most cold cuts, bacon, jerky, cured meats, hot dogs, chicken nuggets, etc.) should be counted as low-quality.

All red meat contained in packaged products or eaten at restaurants should be counted as low-quality unless you have specific knowledge that it came from a wild or grass-fed animal or is at least 90 percent lean.

Always count farm-raised seafoods as low-quality unless they bear the Aquaculture Stewardship Council's "Responsibly Farmed" consumer label.

Animal fats used for cooking, including bacon grease and lard, should be counted as low-quality meats.

Typical serving sizes of low-quality meat and seafood include one hamburger patty and a palm-size piece of fish.

Sweets

This category includes all foods and beverages containing substantial amounts of refined sugars, including soft drinks, candy, pastries, and other desserts.

All food and beverages sweetened artificially should be considered sweets.

Honey, maple syrup, and agave nectar are not counted as sweets. Don't count them at all.

Coffee drinks sweetened with sugar or dairy should be categorized as sweets.

Dark chocolate does not count as a sweet if it's at least 80 percent cacao and consumed in small amounts of 100 calories or less.

Breakfast cereals with more than 10 grams of sugar per serving are to be considered sweets unless they contain dried fruit.

All fruit juices containing added sugar and all processed fruit snacks such as Fruit Rollups should be counted as sweets.

Yogurt products containing some form of sugar as their second ingredient should be counted as sweets.

Typical serving sizes of sweets include a slice of pie, a small candy bar, and a 12-ounce can of soda.

Fried Foods

This category includes all deep-fried foods such as potato chips, fried chicken, fritters, and donuts.

Pan-fried, stir-fried, and sautéed foods do not count as fried foods.

Typical serving sizes of fried foods include a small bag of potato chips and one whole donut.

Appendix B

Use this table to keep track of how often you eat foods of each type during one week. Use lines to represent one occasion of eating a given type of food. Use vertical lines to indicate full portions and dots to indicate half-portions.

Food Type	Number of Times Eaten This Week
Vegetables	
Fruit	
Nuts and Seeds	
Fish and High-Quality Meats	
Whole Grains	
Dairy	
Refined Grains	
Other Foods	
Low-Quality Meats	
Sweets	
Fried Foods	

Appendix C

While I was writing this book, I played my own agnostic healthy-eating game for one week. Here I share my record of what I ate (and drank) on those seven days not for prescriptive purposes but merely to give you a concrete example of the game in action.

Monday

You will see a lot of peaches in this food journal. That's because my wife and I have a peach tree in our back yard and it was bearing fruit at the time I recorded this journal. There's nothing wrong with eating what you have!

Breakfast	
Bowl of Life breakfast cereal with whole milk and blueberries	1 Whole grain
Orange juice	1 Dairy
Coffee	2 Fruits
Lunch	
Brown rice, bean, and vegetable burrito with whole-wheat tortilla and tomato salsa	2 Whole grains
Butternut squash soup	3 Vegetables
Spicy Hot V8 juice	1 Fruit
Peach	
Snack	
Almonds	1 Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils
Dinner	
Pork tenderloin	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Mixed vegetables	1 Vegetable
Toasted whole-wheat bread with old-fashioned peanut butter	1 Whole grain
Beer	1 Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils
Dark chocolate	
Snack	
Peach	1 Fruit

Tuesday

If it seems like I eat a lot of food, that's because I do. Because I exercise at least 90 minutes a day I need to consume eat least 3,000 calories a day to avoid wasting away.

Breakfast	
Bowl of Grape Nuts Flakes breakfast cereal with whole milk and blueberries	1 Whole grain 1 Dairy
Orange juice	2 Fruits
Coffee	
Lunch	
Leftover pork tenderloin	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Leftover mixed vegetables	2 Vegetables
Toasted whole-wheat bread with old-fashioned peanut butter	1 Whole grain
Spicy Hot V8 juice	1 Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils
Peach	1 Fruit
Snack	
Cashews	1 Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils
Dinner	
Baked tilapia	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Boiled potatoes with olive oil, salt, and pepper	2 Vegetables
Brussels sprouts	1 Other (2nd beer)
2 beers	
Dark chocolate	
Snack	
Greek yogurt (while milk) with dried cherries, honey, and Grape Nuts Flakes	1 Dairy ½ Fruit ½ Whole grain

Wednesday

I went out for lunch with my wife on this particular day. The restaurant we selected served no whole-grain breads, so I got my sandwich on ciabatta bread and enjoyed every bite of it. We were still away from home when I got hungry again and ducked inside a Starbucks for a pumpkin muffin. That's two refined grains in one day—but they were the only two refined grains I ate all week.

Breakfast	
Bowl of Life breakfast cereal with whole milk and blueberries	1 Whole grain 1 Dairy
Orange juice	2 Fruits
Coffee	
Lunch	
Grilled vegetable sandwich with cheese on ciabatta bread	1 Vegetable 1 Refined grain
Fruit smoothie	1 Fruit 1 Dairy (cheese + yogurt in smoothie)
Snack	
Pumpkin muffin	1 Refined grain
Dinner	
Grilled marinated chicken breasts	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Brussels sprouts	1 Vegetable
Whole-wheat toast with old-fashioned peanut butter	1 Whole grain 1 Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils
Beer	
Dark chocolate	
Snack	
Peach	1 Fruit

Thursday

Perhaps you have noticed that there is a lot of repetition in my diet. I eat more or less the same breakfast every day, I rely on Spicy Hot V8 juice to provide an extra vegetable portion at lunch, and so forth. These habits are elements of the eating identity I have developed.

Breakfast	
Bowl of Grape Nuts Flakes breakfast cereal with whole milk and blueberries	1 Whole grain 1 Dairy
Orange juice	2 Fruits
Coffee	
Snack	
Fruit smoothie	2 Fruits
Lunch	
Chicken Caesar salad	2 Vegetables
Spicy Hot V8 juice	1 High-quality meat and seafood 1 Other (Caesar dressing)
Snack	
Almonds	1 Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils
Dinner	
Tuna casserole with whole-wheat pasta and peas	2 Vegetables 1 High-quality meat and seafood
Small Caesar salad	1 Whole grain
Beer	
Dark chocolate	
Snack	
Greek yogurt (whole milk) with dried cherries, honey, and Grape Nuts Flakes	1 Dairy ½ Fruit ½ Whole grain

Friday

I drank three alcoholic beverages on the evening of this Friday, which almost qualifies as a binge. This is not unusual for me. I like to drink and typically relax my one-drink limit one night a week. One of the things I like about the agnostic healthy-eating game is that it affords freedom to indulge personal dietary weaknesses to a harmless extent by assigning a general limit to consumption of lower-quality (i.e. “acceptable”) foods and allowing the individual to balance the food types within this classification against one another. I eat fewer sweets and fried foods so I can drink more beer, but someone else might consume less alcohol and eat fewer low-quality meats so she can eat more sweets.

Breakfast	
Bowl of Life breakfast cereal with whole milk and blueberries	1 Whole grain
Orange juice	1 Dairy
Coffee	2 Fruits
Lunch	
Leftover tuna casserole with whole-wheat pasta and peas	2 Vegetables
Spicy Hot V8 juice	1 Whole grain
	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Snack	
Cashews	1 Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils
Beer	
Dinner	
Oysters Rockefeller	2 High-quality meat and seafood
Beet salad	3 Vegetables
Filet mignon	4 Other (wine and sauces)
Mashed potatoes	1 Sweet
Spring peas	
2 glasses wine	
Cheesecake	

Saturday

As you see, I make a regular habit of eating dinner leftovers for lunch. It's convenient for me because I work at home, so I don't have to worry about packaging leftovers to take to the office. I've also found that it's easier to work vegetables into my lunches with leftovers than it is with traditional lunch fare such as sandwiches.

Breakfast	
Whole-wheat bagel with cream cheese, lox, red onions, tomato, and capers	1 Whole grain 1 Dairy
Orange juice	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Coffee	1 Fruit ½ Vegetable
Lunch	
Leftover tuna casserole with whole-wheat pasta and peas	1 High-quality meat and seafood 2 Vegetables
Spicy Hot V8 juice	1 Whole grain
Snack	
Peanut M&M's	1 Sweet
Dinner	
Salmon burger on whole-wheat bread	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Sweet potatoes	2 Vegetables
Peas	1 Other (condiments and sauces)
Beer	
Snack	
Peach	1 Fruit

Sunday

I'm struck by how utterly "normal" my eating looks on this day in particular. Bacon. Peanut butter and jelly. Fajitas. This wasn't my healthiest day of the week, but as normal as it was it still conformed largely to the one rule of the agnostic healthy-eating game and it didn't ruin my chances of achieving the right balance of food types for the whole week. Of course, there are plenty of diet-cult members who would look at this food journal and warn me that I'm headed for an early grave. But I know what to say to them: "Oh, dear, I see they've gotten to you, too."

Breakfast	
Omelet with cheddar cheese, spinach, tomatoes, onions, and capers	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Bacon	1 Vegetable
Home-fried potatoes	1 Fruit
Orange juice	1 Fried food
Coffee	1 Low-quality meat and seafood
Lunch	
Split pea soup	2 Vegetables
Old-fashioned peanut butter and 100% raspberry fruit spread sandwich on whole-wheat bread	1 Whole grain
Spicy Hot V8 juice	1 Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils
	½ Fruit
Snack	
Peach	1 Fruit
Dinner	
Chicken and vegetable fajitas with corn tortillas	1 Vegetable
Beer	1 High-quality meat and seafood
Dark chocolate	1 Whole grain
Snack	
Greek yogurt (whole milk) with dried cherries, honey, and Grape Nuts Flakes	1 Dairy
	½ Fruit
	½ Whole grain

Week’s Totals

I came fairly close to earning “extra credit” for this week by eating each food type more often than any food type of lesser quality. The only significant departures from “perfect” balance in my diet were a high frequency of whole-grain consumption (which is normal for me because I need my carbs for sports training) and a large number in the “Other Foods” column because of my love of beer. Still, I managed to adhere to the basic rule of eating each “essential” food type more often than any “recommended” food type and each “recommended” food type more often than any “acceptable” food type.

Food Type	Number of Times Eaten This Week
Vegetables	27.5
Fruit	23
Nuts, seeds, and healthy oils	8
High-quality meat and seafood	14
Whole grains	16.5
Dairy	10
Refined grains	2
Other foods	7
Low-quality meat and seafood	1
Sweets	2
Fried foods	1