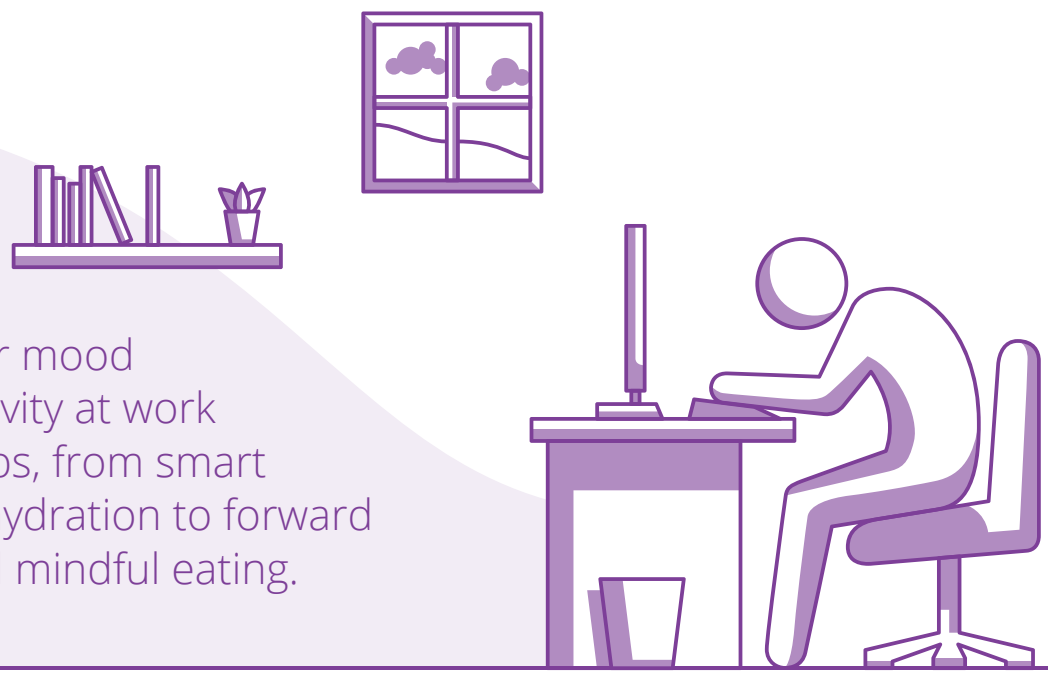


How to eat healthy at work

7 healthy eating tips for the office





Improve your mood and productivity at work with these tips, from smart snacks and hydration to forward planning and mindful eating.

There was a time when most people worked the land. Today, more and more of us sit at desks. Sedentary lifestyles are compounded by the labour-saving electronic devices and vehicles in our personal lives. Add to this the expansive range of food options often found in and around offices that aren't in keeping with the latest nutritional science study results, and it's a recipe for poor health.

But poor nutrition doesn't just impact our health, it can affect our performance at work by negatively impacting concentration and energy levels, and cause irritability, frustration and impatience. One [study found](#) that employees who participated in a wellness program that included nutritional programs resulted in higher productivity – “approximately equal to an additional productive work day per month for the average worker.”

We all know we should ‘eat a balanced diet and take regular exercise’, but it's easier said than done when you have nine-hour days, no time for a lunch break, a two-hour commute and a home life to fit into 16 waking hours.

As The Harvard Business Review stated in its article [What You Eat Affects Your Productivity](#): “It's not awareness we need, it's an action plan that makes healthy eating easier to accomplish.”

This article contains lots of practical advice on how to improve your diet at work including small but meaningful changes in habits and an introduction to ‘mindful eating’. It will help you understand good and balanced nutrition and offer advice on how to optimise your diet at work so you can benefit from its effects:

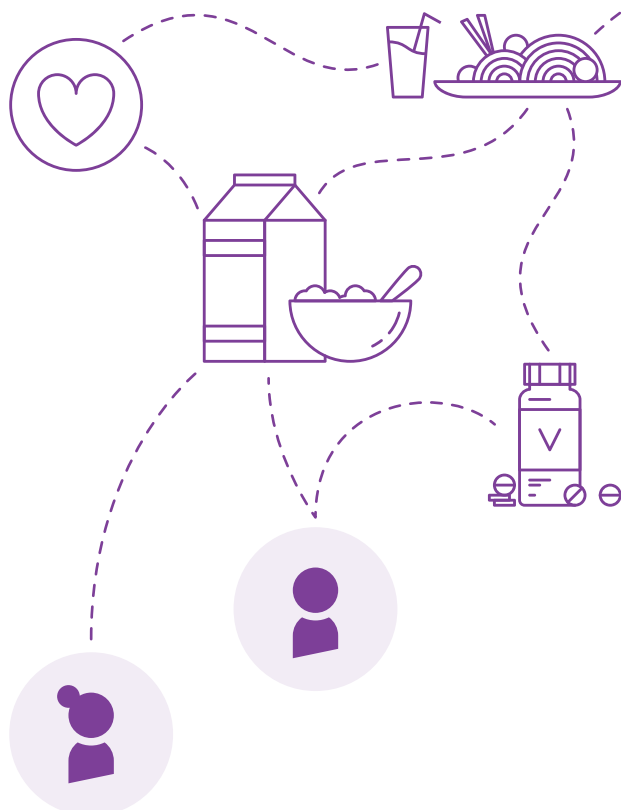
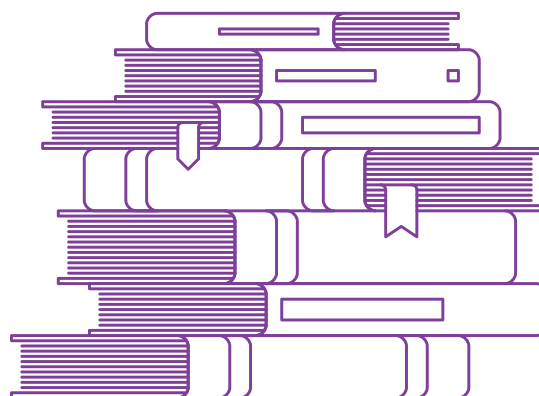
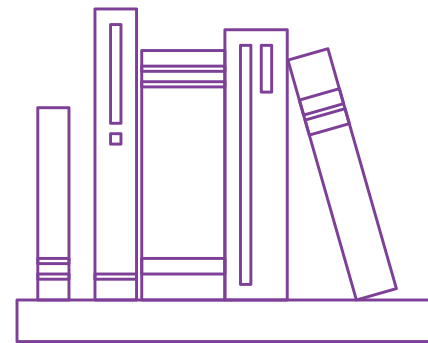
- Improved
 - Cognitive function
 - Immune system
 - Energy levels
 - Mental health
- Reduced
 - Chance of lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease
 - Stress

By adopting the strategies and tactics here you will be on the path to improved work performance as well as overall health and well-being.

1. Educate yourself

The first and most important thing to do is learn about the nutritional value and impact of foods and drinks – and reading this is a part of that. Most of us will know what's healthy and what's not, but nutrition is more complex than good vs bad. There are also lots of myths about various foods, for example, sushi and granola bars both contain more sugar than many assume.

By educating yourself, you will be able to make simple and easy changes to your diet for healthier outcomes and better work performance. For example, eggs on toast makes a better breakfast than jam on toast by switching sugar for protein, zinc, iron, vitamin D and the brain-boosting chemical choline. It is also a [myth](#) that eggs contribute to high cholesterol.



2. Building a routine

Part of the reason we fall into bad habits is because we don't plan and build a healthy routine, or we just let our plan be 'whatever is easiest' (and this usually means unhealthy). By building a routine, you're prepared for meals and choices with healthier options whether that's a homemade meal or saying no to cake. And, importantly, you're making your eating decisions *before* you get hungry.

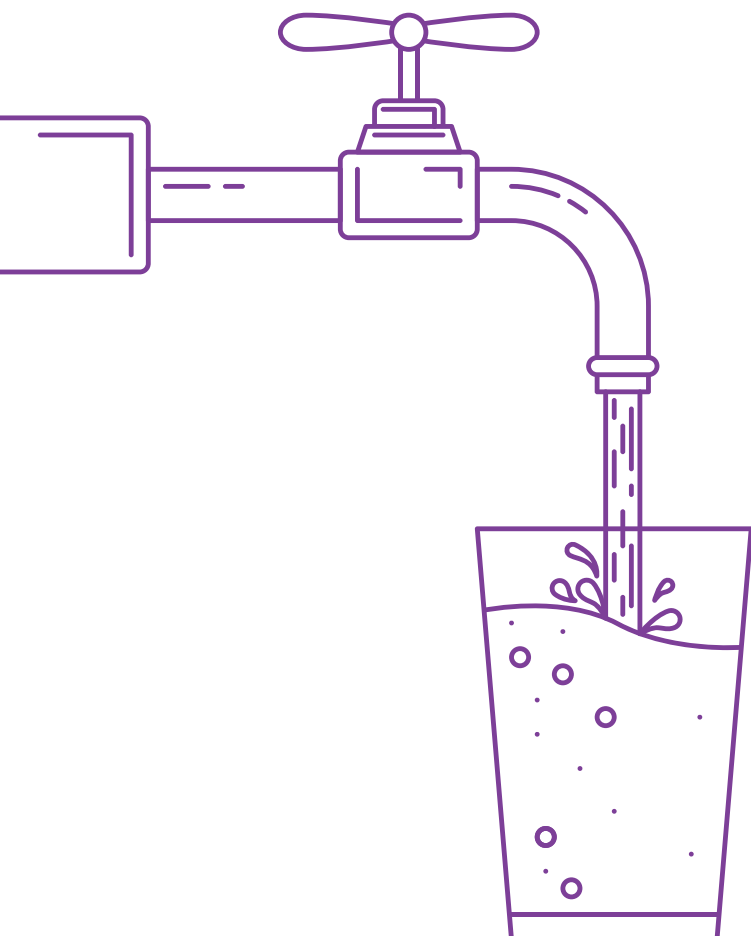
Key to this is simplicity: make a simple dish that you can take into work. This might also include routinely buying healthy snacks (carrot sticks, nuts and seeds) on your way to work so you don't end up buying crisps/potato chips and sweets or candy from the vending machine.

3. Don't skip meals

Aetna International Senior Medical Director, Dr Stella George, says, "When you eat and how often you eat are just as important as eating well and getting the right nutrients in your diet. It's important not to skip meals or leave it too long between eating healthy snacks as your glucose will drop, making it harder to concentrate and you're more likely to overeat or eat the wrong things at your next meal."

Skipping meals has a number of negative effects:

- You're more likely to overeat at other times
- You're more likely to gain weight
- Mood is negatively impacted
- Concentration suffers as blood sugar and energy declines



Importantly, don't skip breakfast. To do so makes you more susceptible to weight gain and at an increased risk of atherosclerosis, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity and high cholesterol. Eating the first meal of the day can encourage your body to [burn more calories throughout the day](#) and help contain rising cortisol (the primary 'stress hormone') levels which are high in the early morning. High levels of cortisol can make you feel anxious or jittery.

Breakfast advice

- Load up on protein at breakfast to kickstart your metabolism, stay full for longer and aren't tempted to snack
- Avoid sugary foods as you'll be chasing that sugar rush all day

4. Stay hydrated

[Dehydration at work](#) can lead to poor productivity, reduced cognitive abilities, slower reaction times and even morale. As such, it is important to stay hydrated but you should try to do so by drinking water and not sugary or caffeinated drinks as they can have adverse side-effects such as dehydration, hyperglycaemia and sleep disruption.

Alcohol or excessive caffeine consumption dehydrates the body and energy drinks (including those containing taurine) have been banned in some workplaces due to their hyper-caffeinated content, lack of nutritional value and detrimental health effects.

After-work drinking can aid team building and boost morale but excessive alcohol can impact the following day by disrupting sleep and dehydrating you – and no one ever did their best work hungover!



5. Smart lunching

Healthy lunching during a busy day is not only the most important thing to get right but can also be the most challenging.

An ideal lunch will contain the right balance of protein, sugars, fat, fibre, carbohydrates and other nutrients.

Dr Stella explains, “A high-carb meal, such as pasta, bread and cereals releases glucose quickly which gives you a burst of energy followed by a slump, draining your motivation and attention. Meanwhile, a high-fat meal provides more sustained energy, but requires our digestive system to work harder, reducing oxygen levels in the brain and making us groggy.”

[One study](#) found that the more fruits and vegetables people consumed (up to seven portions), the happier, more engaged, and more creative they tended to be. This is because fruits and vegetables contain vital nutrients that encourage the production of dopamine which plays a role in the experience of curiosity, motivation and engagement. They also contain antioxidants that improve memory and enhance mood.

A good way to ensure you eat a healthy lunch is to plan ahead (see [Building A Routine](#), previously), and shop with work lunches in mind. For example, you can shop for the elements of a big salad that will really fill you up: not just cucumber and lettuce but also cabbage, peppers and carrots.

Lunch advice

- Take time to take your lunch
- Prepare your lunch at home
- Find a lunch buddy and/or start a lunch club
- Keep food at work (dressing, condiment etc.)
- Don't eat at your desk – it's much easier to overeat if you're distracted
- Find the healthy eating options near your office
- Exercise portion control
- Avoid processed/packaged foods

6. Sensible snacking

While many people try to cut out snacking, grazing on the right things can help maintain energy levels throughout the day. Hunger can be a distraction at work and many of us fall prey to the vending machine with all its salty, sugary, fatty badness. But there are healthy ways to snack that will also boost your mood and productivity.

So, what's a good snack for work? Eat nuts and seeds, fruits and vegetables – for example, carrots, peppers, celery and even green beans make great snacks. If hunger is a particular distraction, try some of these high-protein snacks: hard-boiled eggs, beef jerky (buy sugar-free varieties), Greek yoghurt, cheese (non-processed), edamame.

As with many parts of this list, the key is preparation. Prepare a bag or box of snacks at home to avoid using vending machines.



7. Mindful eating

“What we eat has a direct influence on our energy levels, focus and power of concentration. It’s difficult to be 100 percent committed to a healthy diet 100 percent of the time. By paying attention to what we’re eating and when, and enjoying the experience, we can allow ourselves to relax and have the occasional treat. Try to apply the 80/20 rule – make the best choices you can most of the time and the treats become just that; a delicious treat rather than the norm. Your concentration, energy levels and mood will all benefit,” says Dr Stella.

Mindfulness means focusing on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting your feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations. Mindful eating means being fully attentive to your food – as you buy, prepare, serve and consume it. For example:

- Consider the health value of every item you add to your shopping list
- Don't eat based on your hunger as you may be tempted to eat more than you need
- Start with small portions, wait and eat more if you need to

- Appreciate your food
- Think about the colour, texture, aroma and even the sounds of your food as you prepare and eat it
- Eat slowly by taking small bites and chew thoroughly. Pause between mouthfuls
- You don't have to eat everything on your plate
- Exercise the right to say no
 - Part of mindful eating is making conscious decisions about what you put into your body, and not sleepwalking into unhealthy eating.
 - As with exercise, there are no cheats. You have to do the work. And lots of healthy eating comes down to will power and this can mean saying no. Consider saying no or moderating your intake of cake, office treats and food in meetings such as biscuits and pastries.

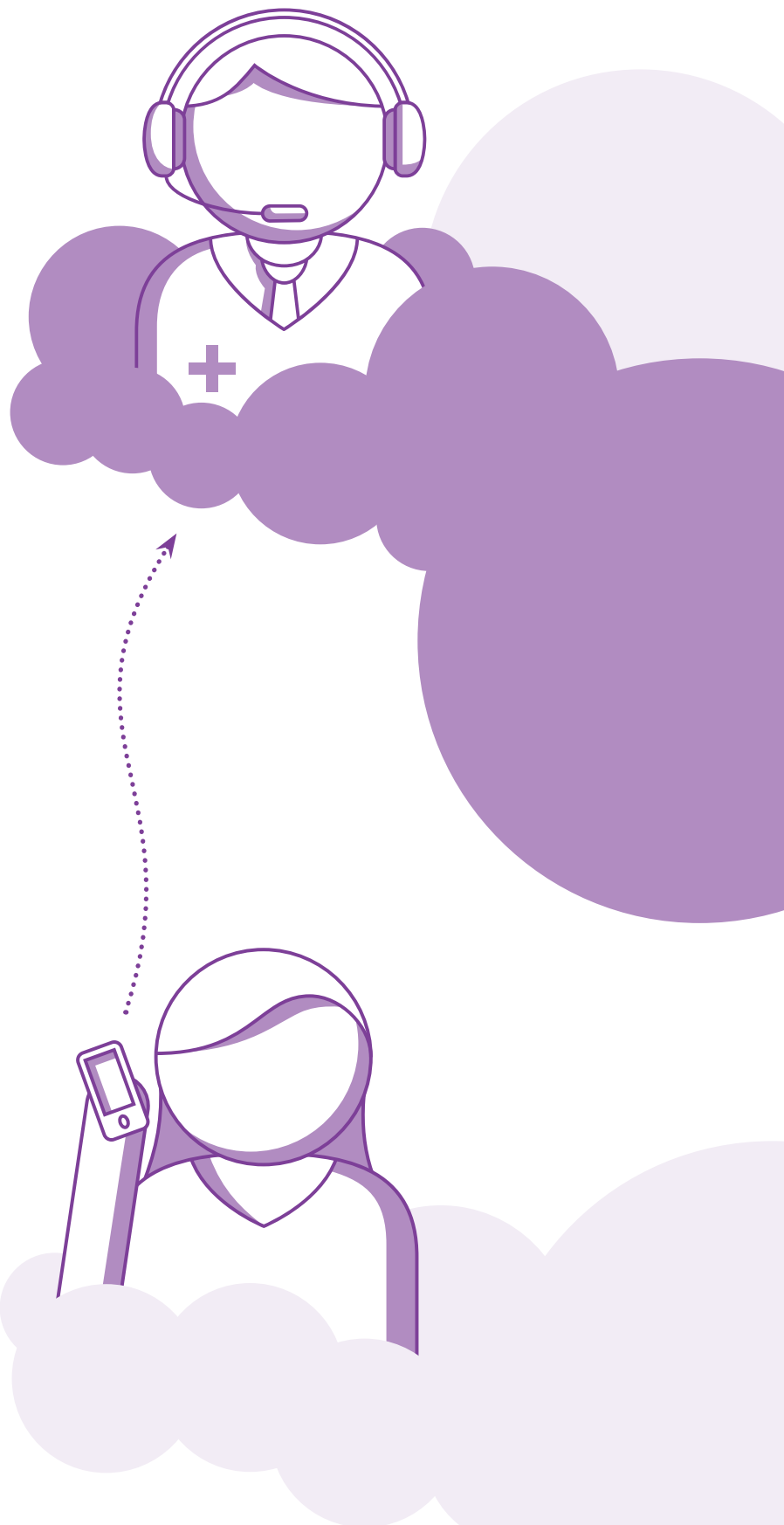
Read our article [Healthy Eating Tips](#) and, for expats, [A Balanced Diet Abroad](#).

How Aetna International can help

Aetna International's CARE team serves as a single point of contact, helping Aetna International plan members access the care they need. This includes arranging admittance to hospital, identifying specialists as well as providing advice from medical experts so we can help support you with advice on how to build and maintain a healthy diet.

For more information on the end-to-end health and wellness support services available for members, please contact one of our expert sales consultants.

[Click here to read more about how the CARE team can support you and your personal health goals.](#)





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