NUTRIENT DENSITY LADDERS

The foods you consume each day range from low to high in nutrient density. Some foods, such as a toaster pastry, have very little nutrition. But other foods, such as 100 percent whole wheat toast and whole fruits and vegetables, are packed with vitamins, minerals, and fiber. These foods are high in nutrient density.

In the next few pages, you will find 6 nutrient density ladders. These ladders are for:

1. Bread, cereals, and grains
2. Fruits and vegetables
3. Meat and meat alternatives
4. Milk and milk alternatives
5. Fats and oils
6. Complete meals (combination foods)

Each ladder lists the most common foods in that food grouping. And each food is put on a step:

- **First step:** These foods are not very nutritious. They may also have a lot of added sugar, fat, salt, or other ingredients your body doesn't need. If you are eating most of your food from this step, try to move up to second step foods as much as you can.

- **Second step:** These foods have some nutrients, but are not as nutritious as foods on the top step. If you are eating most of your foods from this step, try to move up to top step foods as much as you can.

- **Top step:** These foods are the most nutritious.

Try to move up the ladder each time you eat. A good goal is to aim for foods on the top step most of the time.

Use the ladders to make smart shopping and eating choices. Aim for as many “top step” foods as possible. To get the most out of your nutrient density ladders, post them in your kitchen or carry them with you to the grocery store.
# Breads, Cereals, and Grains

## Nutrient Density Ladder
Key nutrients: B vitamins, fiber

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP STEP</th>
<th>SECOND STEP</th>
<th>FIRST STEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • 100% whole wheat & whole grain bread and bread products  
• Brown rice  
• High fiber whole grain cereals  
• Stove-cooked steel-cut or rolled oatmeal  
• Whole wheat pasta | • Enriched white bread, cereal, and grain products  
• Enriched flour, low sugar breakfast cereal  
• Instant oatmeal  
• English muffins  
• White rice  
• Pasta | • Unrefined (whole) flour  
• Wheat germ  
• Wild rice  
• Whole wheat couscous  
• Whole grain crackers (no trans fats)  
• Plain popcorn  
• Buckwheat  
• Wheat berries  
• Bulgur wheat  
• Quinoa |

| • Baked chips  
• Wheat crackers  
• Couscous  
• Bagels  
• Low fat granola  
• Puffed cereal  
• Matzoh | • Baked chips  
• Wheat crackers  
• Couscous  
• Bagels  
• Low fat granola  
• Puffed cereal  
• Matzoh | • Nonenriched white flour and foods made with white flour  
• Salted crackers  
• Sugary/frosted cereal  
• Store-bought cereal party mix  
• Regular chips and pretzels  
• Fried rice |
### NUTRIENT DENSITY LADDER

Key nutrients: Vitamins C and A, B vitamins, fiber, phytochemicals (plant nutrients)

#### TOP STEP
- All fresh fruits and vegetables
- Fruits canned in 100% fruit juice
- Fresh-squeezed fruit and vegetable juice
- Plain, frozen vegetables
- Homemade vegetable soups (not creamed)
- Dried fruit no sugar added
- Frozen fruit no sugar added
- Baked apple

#### SECOND STEP
- Fruits canned in light syrup
- Canned fruit and vegetable juice
- Canned vegetables
- Canned vegetable soups
- Store-bought apple sauce
- Fruit roll-ups
- Fruit spread (100% fruit)
- Frozen fruits (with added sugar or syrup)

#### FIRST STEP
- All fried and batter-dipped fruits and vegetables: hash browns, onion rings, French fries, tempura, etc.
- Frozen vegetables in butter or cream sauce
- Jelly/jam
- Fruit gelatin desserts
- Potato chips
- Fruit salad mixed with mayonnaise
- Fruit drinks and fruit sodas
- Banana chips (fried)
MEAT AND MEAT ALTERNATIVES

NUTRIENT DENSITY LADDER
Key nutrients: Protein, iron, zinc

TOP STEP
- Vegetarian burgers
- Nuts: almonds, walnuts, pecans, Brazil nuts (contain protein, high in healthy fat)
- Dried beans and lentils
- Tofu, miso, edamame, tempeh, textured vegetable protein (TVP)
- Lean chicken or turkey (skinless, boneless, white meat)
- Fresh fish
- Tuna packed in water
- Low fat refried beans
- Low sodium canned beans rinsed
- Egg whites
- Shellfish: clams, crab, lobster, scallops, shrimp
- Peanuts

SECOND STEP
- Lean hamburger meat
- Peanut butter
- Eggs
- Tuna packed in oil
- Chicken or turkey (dark meat)
- Pork tenderloin
- Filet mignon
- Egg whites
- Shellfish: clams, crab, lobster, scallops, shrimp
- Peanuts

FIRST STEP
- Refried beans
- Hot dog
- Spareribs
- Ground beef
- Pork chop
- Processed meats: salami, bologna, bratwurst, Italian sausage

SECOND STEP
- All fried meat products
- Regular hamburger meat
- Chicken wings
- Corned beef
- Prime rib
# MILK AND MILK ALTERNATIVES

## NUTRIENT DENSITY LADDER

Key nutrients: Calcium, protein, vitamin D

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP STEP</th>
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<th>SECOND STEP</th>
<th>FIRST STEP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Fortified soy milk and rice milk</td>
<td>• Nonfat yogurt</td>
<td>• 2% milk</td>
<td>• Whole milk</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Nonfat and 1% milk</td>
<td>• Fat-free dry milk powder</td>
<td>• Low fat ice cream</td>
<td>• Cheeses from whole milk: cheddar, American, Swiss</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Buttermilk from 1% milk</td>
<td>• Evaporated fat-free milk</td>
<td>• Low fat frozen yogurt</td>
<td>• Regular yogurt</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Low fat cheeses: ricotta and mozzarella</td>
<td>• Low fat chocolate milk</td>
<td>• Cottage cheese</td>
<td>• Evaporated whole milk</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Low fat cottage cheese</td>
<td>• Feta cheese</td>
<td>• Low fat yogurt</td>
<td>• Sour cream</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Low fat sour cream</td>
<td>• Whipping cream</td>
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<td>• Low fat cream cheese</td>
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### FATS AND OILS

#### NUTRIENT DENSITY LADDER
Key nutrients: Omega-3 fatty acids, monounsaturated fat, polyunsaturated fats, vitamin E

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>Oils and Fats</th>
<th>Oils and Fats</th>
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</table>
| TOP STEP | - Olive oil  
- Flaxseed oil  
- Tahini paste  
- Pesto (made with olive oil)  
- Canola oil  
- Walnut oil | - Avocado oil  
- Sesame oil |
| SECOND STEP | - Buttery spreads without added transfat  
- Miracle Whip® salad dressing  
- Whipped butter  
- Corn, safflower, and soy bean oils | - Reduced fat mayonnaise  
- Coconut and palm oils |
| FIRST STEP | - Butter  
- Regular mayonnaise  
- Hydrogenated fats  
- Trans fats  
- Stick margarine  
- Shortening  
- Lard |
**COMBINATION FOODS**

**NUTRIENT DENSITY LADDER**
The following food combinations are categorized according to their nutrient density. As you can see, the meals in the top step contain less saturated fat and more fiber, and they are also less processed in comparison to foods in the first and second steps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOP STEP</th>
<th>SECOND STEP</th>
<th>FIRST STEP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Whole wheat pasta with ground turkey/soy meatballs and marinara sauce, served with steamed vegetables</td>
<td>• Beef stir-fry with white rice</td>
<td>• Meat-and-cheese pizza</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Tofu/lean chicken and vegetable stir-fry with brown rice</td>
<td>• Spaghetti and beef meatballs topped with marinara sauce</td>
<td>• Pasta with cream sauces and cheese</td>
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<td>• White bread sandwich with ham or roast beef, vegetables, and regular mayonnaise</td>
<td>• Fast food</td>
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<td>• Club sandwich on white bread with mayonnaise</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Fried foods</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Skinless, boneless chicken or grilled fish, served with green salad and baked potato</td>
<td>• Vegetarian pizza</td>
<td>• Creamed soups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 100% whole wheat bread sandwich with chicken, turkey, or tuna; reduced fat mayonnaise and/or mustard; and vegetables</td>
<td>• White bread sandwich with pastrami, mayonnaise, and cheese</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Steak, mashed potatoes (made with butter and cream), and gravy</td>
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<td>• Meat-and-cheese lasagna</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Vegetable soups and stews (not creamed)</td>
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<td>• Stove-top oatmeal mixed with honey and almonds</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Two poached eggs served with 100% whole wheat toast and whipped butter</td>
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