

# A Guide to Meal Replacements<sup>1</sup>

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Many older Americans have problems eating enough to get the calories and nutrients needed for good health. Multiple factors such as disease, money, physical conditions, and access to food and food preparation areas can affect your nutritional status. Consuming meal replacements is one way to offset the effects of these factors. This publication will help you decide if meal replacements are right for you.

## What Are Meal Replacements?

Meal replacements are snack-size foods with the same amount of nutrition as a full meal. These foods are a great way to get the calories and nutrients you need when eating a meal is not possible. These foods are available in a variety of forms, flavors, and consistencies. The most common types of meal replacements are bars and liquid meal replacements. Many of these products can be found over-the-counter at your local pharmacy, grocery store, or discount stores with a pharmacy section.



Figure 1. Meal replacements are snack-size foods with the same amount of nutrition as a full meal. These foods are a great way to get the calories and nutrients you need when eating a meal is not possible. Credits: SaraJane CC 2.0 <http://bit.ly/yGFutG>

## Common Ingredients

Foods designed as meal replacements vary greatly in their nutrient content. For example, many meal replacements targeted for older adults are high in calories, although lower calorie meal replacement foods are available if weight loss is your goal. Meal replacements

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Figure 2. If you have problems chewing regular foods, the soft or liquid types of meal replacements can be helpful alternatives to solid foods. Credits: Digital Wallpapers CC 2.0 <http://bit.ly/xkTrJI>

also vary in their carbohydrate, protein, and fat contents.

### Textures Available

Meal replacements are available in a range of textures. These include solid snack bars, puddings, and liquids. If you have problems chewing regular foods, the soft or liquid types of meal replacements can be helpful alternatives to solid foods.

### Why Do People Use Meal Replacements?

Meal replacements have become popular for a variety of reasons such as busy work schedules, increased cost of food, and health conditions that affect food intake. Whether you are a healthy aging adult on the go or have diabetes or other diseases, meal replacements can help supplement your diet with nutrients that may be lacking. When choosing a meal replacement product, keep in mind your overall goal for including them in the diet. These products not only differ in ingredients, but also in their ability to make you feel full.

### For Healthy Aging

Are you healthy and trying to add more nutrition into your diet for protective reasons? Are you active and short on time to get the calories you need at meals? In either case, these foods can be a quick way to get the calories and nutrients that may be lacking in your diet. The added nutrients also can help reduce your risk of developing certain diseases as you age. For example, some meal replacements contain extra calcium and vitamin D to support bone health, which may reduce your risk for osteoporosis.

### For Specific Conditions

Some meal replacements are designed to help prevent or control certain diseases. Some examples include the following:

- High calorie for weight gain
- Low calorie for weight loss
- Low glycemic index for diabetes control
- High protein for wound healing
- Thicker consistencies for swallowing disorders
- Easy digestibility for intestinal problems
- Antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids for immune health
- Flavored for problems with taste

Speak with your doctor or a registered dietitian (RD) if you have a condition that you think can be helped by using meal replacements. They can help you decide what it is you would like to get from these products and how to choose the best one for you.

### Are Meal Replacements Safe?

There are several things to keep in mind when deciding whether or not to use one of these products. Most importantly, remember that these foods do not fully replace the nutrients and other food components of a wholesome

meal. Although they can add calories and nutrients to your diet, it is still important to eat regular meals to get nutrients these products may not provide. Some people have noted minor side effects from meal replacements; diarrhea is one of the most common effects of eating these foods regularly.

## Summary

Meal replacements have proven to be beneficial for people of all ages with special nutrient needs, especially for the aging adult. They provide calories and nutrients that may not be obtained in adequate amounts because of irregular eating patterns or a health condition. Meal replacements can increase the intake of calories, protein, antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, fiber, vitamins, and minerals, all of which are needed for a healthy body.

Before choosing a meal replacement, decide what you want to gain from including it in your diet. Are you lacking certain nutrients in your diet? Do you have a specific disease you are trying to control?

Once you know the reason for using a meal replacement, research which type contains the ingredients you are looking for. Talk to your physician or a registered dietitian before adding it to your diet, especially if you are being treated for a health condition. While most meal replacement products can be purchased over-the-counter, some require a prescription.

It is important to remember that eating a healthy diet of wholesome foods is the ideal way to prevent and fight disease. Meal replacements, however, can be helpful if you are unable to meet all of your energy and nutrient needs with regular meals and snacks.

If you have questions regarding meal replacements and would like to find a registered

dietitian (RD) in your area, you can visit the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics RD Finder at <http://www.eatright.org/programs/rdfinder/>. For information about healthy diets and nutrition, contact your local Cooperative Extension office (in Florida, find your local Extension office at <http://www.solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>) or download free consumer fact sheets at <http://www.solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu>.

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