

Building a Balanced Bowl

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Serving a meal in a bowl is a way to mix up your breakfast, lunch, or dinner routine. Bowls can be a sweet or savory meal, snack, or treat. They're easy to pull together and quick to clean up. With the right ingredients, bowls can be nutritious and filling, providing a variety of nutrients to fuel your day. Having a guide will help to build a balanced bowl in no time. Follow along for some ideas to fill your bowl!

Building a Bowl without a recipe

A meal in a bowl does not have to follow a set recipe. Consider starting with a base, bulking it up, and then adding a boost of flavor, texture, or extra nutrition. Knowing these three parts allows you to build a bowl with whatever you have on hand.

Within these three parts – the base, the bulk, and the boost – our goal is to get all five food groups when we can. This includes fruits, vegetables, protein, grains, and dairy. Fruit may not always fit in a savory grain bowl. Or vegetables might not feel right in a sweet breakfast bowl. We can be flexible in knowing that we will likely get the nutrients from these groups in another meal or snack throughout the day. So, aim for fitting as many food groups as you can into your bowl.

Base

The base will go at the bottom of your bowl and is going to be a grain. There are two types of grains to choose from: whole grains or refined grains. Let's



start with a whole grain. Whole grains provide fiber to help us feel full longer. This fiber allows the energy from whole grains to be released over time, helping to sustain our energy levels. Whole grains are packed with essential vitamins and minerals like B vitamins, magnesium, iron, and zinc to support our energy levels, bones and teeth, and immunity. Whole grains are heart healthy and can help to lower cholesterol levels in your blood.

Refined grains are grains that have gone through processing to remove the outer shell. This makes for a smoother texture and helps to extend the shelf life. Removing the shell removes some of the fiber and



some vitamins and minerals. Refined grains often have some of these nutrients added back to it. These grains will have the word “enriched” in the product name or in the ingredients list. Refined grains provide similar nutrients to whole grains without the benefits of fiber. Choose whole grains most of the time to get the best bang for your buck.

► Decide if you are making a sweet or savory bowl. Add a ½ cup of your cooked grain to the bowl for a single serving. Some base ideas are below.

- Savory Bowl Base:
 - Whole grains: brown rice, whole-wheat pasta, quinoa*, couscous, bulgur, barley, buckwheat*, stone-ground grits, farro, freekeh, millet, sorghum, teff, amaranth*
 - Refined grains: enriched white rice or jasmine rice, quick or instant grits, pasta
- Sweet Bowl Base:
 - Whole grains: whole oats or steel-cut oats, stone-ground grits, barley, quinoa*, amaranth*
 - Refined grains: instant oats, quick or instant grits

**Amaranth, buckwheat, and quinoa are “pseudo-grains” and aren’t from the same family as grains but are grouped with grains because of the nutrients they provide.*

Bulk

The bulk is going to add color, flavor, texture, and more nutrients to your bowl. The bulk can consist of fruits, vegetables, and protein. Fruits and vegetables come in fresh, frozen, canned, and dried varieties. They’ll add more fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Protein will support strength and will help to keep you full.

Add some fresh vegetables raw, others are better with some preparation. Fresh cucumbers can add a refreshing crunch. Sweet potatoes are a great addition to many sweet and savory bowls but will be better baked or roasted before adding to your base. When choosing canned vegetables, reach for “low sodium” or “no salt added” varieties. Consider rinsing canned vegetables before using. Frozen vegetables may help save some prep time if they are already sliced, diced, or cubed for your bowl. Frozen vegetables often take less time to cook because they are already partially cooked. Add a ½ cup of one or more vegetables to your bowl. Choose a variety of vegetables to add colors, texture, flavor, and nutrients.

Fresh, frozen, and canned fruit pair nicely with oatmeal. If preparing a bowl for later, consider adding frozen fruit in advance, allowing the bowl to refrigerate and the fruit to thaw for 2 to 3 hours before enjoying. When choosing frozen, canned,

or dried fruit, reach for ones with little to no added sugar. We may often think of fruit going in a sweet breakfast bowl with granola or cereal and milk or yogurt. But some fruits add a sweet bite to a savory dish. Consider adding pineapple to a teriyaki chicken bowl or baked apples to a savory pork bowl. Add ½ cup of one or more fruits to your bowl, if it makes sense. Reach for the colors of a rainbow in your bowl with different fruits and vegetables.

There are a variety of protein sources in plant and animal forms. These include lean meats, fish, eggs; plant products like beans, peas, lentils; and dairy products like milk, yogurt, and cheese. Protein helps us to feel full for longer. Add about a ¼ to a ½ cup of your protein of choice to your bowl.

- ▶ For an extra creamy bowl of oatmeal with more protein, add Greek yogurt. To pack even more protein in, consider making your oats with milk instead of water.
- ▶ Trim visible fat on meat or drain it after cooking before adding it to your bowl. Always cook meat to the appropriate internal temperature.
- ▶ Eggs are often thought of as breakfast staples but are also a great addition to a savory lunch or dinner bowl. A fried or hard-boiled egg can add protein to your favorite grain and vegetable.

Boost

The boost can add nutrients, texture, and flavor. You can add it at the end, like a topping on your bowl, or incorporate it in the preparation, like seasoning the base or the bulk. Add boosts in smaller amounts than the base or the bulk.

Some common boosts for sweet bowls may include honey, maple syrup, granola, nuts, seeds, dried fruit, or peanut butter. Honey and maple syrup will sweeten your bowl. Granola, nuts, and seeds add some additional fiber, vitamins, and minerals along with a fun crunch. Dried fruit can also help to sweeten your bowl, add a new texture, and provide

some fiber. Peanut butter can pack in some protein along with a nutty taste and creamy texture.

Savory bowls may also feature some of these boosts and more. A taco bowl may include shredded cheese and a dollop of sour cream or plain Greek yogurt on top. You can season your grains, vegetables, and protein throughout building your bowl or add it at the end. For a Mediterranean bowl try hummus, tzatziki sauce, or feta cheese to add a delicious tang. Other grain bowls often feature favorite condiments or dressings like barbecue sauce, salsa, or teriyaki.

Put it All Together

When you're ready to build your bowl, think about each part as a layer. Start by filling the bottom of your bowl with your grain of choice. Bulk up the bowl with fruits, vegetables, and protein. Finally, top it off with a boost. Some other bites of information for building your bowl include:

- ▶ Bowls can be great for the whole family! Infants and toddlers may be more comfortable eating the ingredients separately from one another. Build your little one a deconstructed bowl of the ingredients that are appropriate for them.
- ▶ Take inspiration from your favorite dishes and deconstruct them into a bowl to mix up your menu. Add a taco bowl into your Taco Tuesday rotation. Or load a bowl with your favorite plant-based proteins for Meat-free Monday.
- ▶ Bowls are a great opportunity to use up some extra ingredients or leftovers that you have on hand. Get creative with items you have in your kitchen!
- ▶ Bowl meals can often be prepped in advance and enjoyed later if stored properly. Prepare the base and the bulk and build your bowl but hold off on the boost. Sauces, condiments, and dressings, if added and allowed to sit, might make some ingredients soggy. To keep their crunch, add nuts, seeds, or granola right before enjoying.

- ▶ Get creative! Recipes can help you feel comfortable and confident in your meal. After a while, pull ideas from recipes and use this guide to build your own bowl.

A meal in a bowl is a way to mix up mealtimes. Following this guide will help to pack in the nutrients for a balanced meal. Aim for a whole grain, a variety of fruits and/or vegetables, lean protein, and a nutritious and delicious boost for a balanced bowl the whole family will love.

References

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