



We are what we eat – let's invest in ourselves

Good nutrition plays a significant role in our lives. The food we eat impacts our health and wellbeing. Making healthy food choices that reflect good nutrition is a challenge in every aspect of life, and perhaps even more so for seafarers given the unique characteristics of life aboard ship. Responsibility for good nutrition at sea is a shared one – seafarers control their consumption, but it is the ship operator and crew managers who must procure and stock healthy food choices and ensure that the ship cook is well trained in planning and preparing nutritious meals.

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What is good nutrition?

Good nutrition is when you get the right amount of nutrients (from healthy food) in the right combinations.

- **Carbohydrates** are our bodies' preferred source of fuel. They give us the energy we need to go about our day and maximize endurance and performance. Fibre is the indigestible carbohydrate found in fruits vegetables, beans and whole grains and is an essential part of a healthy diet.
- **Protein** is important for building muscle as well as the repair and recovery of bones, joints, and ligaments after activity.
- **Fat** keeps us full and satisfied, helps cushion our bones and joints, and increases the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins A, E, D, and K
- **Water:** Essential for hydration, calorie control, skin and muscle health, and kidney and bowel function.

Building a healthy and balanced diet – a healthy plate

Generally, when serving yourself a meal, fill half of your plate with fruits and vegetables and split the other half between carbohydrates such as bread/ pasta, whole grain, or (brown) rice and protein (ideally) lean.

Also, make sure that you drink at least 8 glasses of water every day as part of your nutritional diet. Water is a major nutritional component that regulates body temperature, lubricates your joints, and protects your major organs and tissues. It also aids in transporting oxygen throughout your body.

The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health has produced the [“Healthy Eating Plate”](#) to illustrate the ideal distribution of various food types that make up a healthy balanced diet.

The benefits of a healthy diet

Most people know that good nutrition together with physical activity can help maintain a healthy weight. However, the benefits of good nutrition go beyond weight control. Good nutrition can help:

- Lower high blood pressure
- Lower high cholesterol levels
- Reduce the risk of heart diseases, diabetes, stroke, osteoporosis, certain types of cancer
- Improve mental well-being
- Improve the ability to fight infection
- Improve the ability to recover from illness or injury
- Increase energy levels

Weight is gained by eating too much and moving too little

Today, activities at work are less physical, daily living tasks have changed and life, in general, is more sedentary. This is also true on board ships. Weight gain occurs when the total daily energy expenditure (calories burned) is less than the calories in the food and beverages consumed. People who are overweight are at greater risk of dying prematurely from chronic health

problems like type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Large portion sizes and drinks with added sugar increase the risk of weight gain and consequently, chronic illnesses.

The additional challenges at sea

A [study of Danish seafarers](#) showed that the proportion of overweight seafarers was more than twice as high as the general Danish population. Another [study](#) involving Italian, Indian and Filipino seafarers on Italian flag vessels showed that 40 percent were overweight and another 11% were obese. All groups were significantly above the national percentages for their countries of origin. Seafarers have little or no control on the food stocked by their employer and seafarers' overeating may be related to physical and psychological factors such as lack of sleep, poor hydration and stress. Food may be seen as one of the few pleasures of the seafarers' daily routine encouraging overeating.

Another challenge pointed out by the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) is shift work and watchkeeping which may lead to snacking on high calorie food and drinks. ISWAN's Health at Sea series has helpful materials on [healthy food](#) and [managing weight](#).

Among the ISWAN tips for healthy food choices and managing weight are:

- Keep portion sizes in check.
- Avoid drinking sugary soft drinks and drink plenty of water 6-8 glasses a day.
- Eat plenty of fruit (3 servings / day), vegetables (3-5 servings / day). Choose more dark green and bright coloured vegetables and orange fruits.
- Try to eat 25-35 grams of fibre each day – whole grains, beans, spinach and romaine lettuce are healthy choices.
- Reduce the amount of meat (+/- 100 g / day), fat (< 35%), oil, sugar and salt you eat.

Adopting healthy eating habits does not have to be overwhelming. The usual pitfall is not knowing where to begin. Eating healthy is all about making changes gradually and working on new habits that will last. There's no one-size-fits-all solution for eating healthy.

Employers' obligations

Healthy food choices aboard start with procurement, and it is the employer's obligation to adequately stock nutritious food and healthy beverage choices that are offered to the crew without charge. The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) regulation 3.2 provides:

“To ensure that seafarers have access to good quality food and drinking water provided under regulated hygienic conditions.

1. 1.* Each Member **shall** ensure that ships that fly its flag carry on board and serve food and drinking water of appropriate quality, nutritional value and quantity that adequately covers the requirements of the ship and takes into account the differing cultural and religious backgrounds.*

2. 2.* Seafarers on board a ship shall be provided with food free of charge during the period of engagement.*

3. 3.* Seafarers employed as ships' cooks with responsibility for food preparation must be trained and qualified for their position on board ship.”*

Training of ships' cooks in preparation of healthy and satisfying meals is not only an obligation, it has proven to result in better choices and eating habits by the rest of the crew as found by the

Danish study: [“What does it take to get a healthy diet at sea? A maritime study of the challenges of promoting a healthy lifestyle at the workplace at sea”](#) ISWAN offers [guidelines](#) for shipping companies for healthy food onboard their ships.

Remember, a healthy workplace includes a healthy diet that takes into consideration differing cultural and religious backgrounds of crewmembers. A healthy diet contributes to seafarer wellbeing as well as reducing the risk of many preventable conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease – very positive goals indeed.

Additional resources

The International Seafarers’ Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) [Seafarers’ Health Information Programme \(SHIP\)](#) includes modules and materials on shipboard fitness, hydration, healthy food and managing weight.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has published [guidelines](#) on the training of ship’s cooks.

Diet related medical conditions

[Type 2 diabetes – Know your risk factors](#)

[Controlling hypertension at sea](#)

The [Mariners Medico Guide app](#) includes the most up to date information about type 2 diabetes, hypertension and other diet related conditions with detailed descriptions of the diseases, symptoms to look out for, and guidance on initial treatment on board. The guide is designed by doctors specialised in maritime medicine as an assessment tool specifically for seafarers while at sea. It is possible to search by symptoms as well as condition, and it is written in easy-to-follow language and steps. It can be downloaded for free for desktop as well as Apple and android mobile devices. Once downloaded, the medical guide is available without internet access. The Mariners Medico Guide includes contact details and links to shore based telemedical assistance and is approved by the Norwegian flag state.