Neu Woman with Lillian

Eat for Your Body

A Nigerian food guide for women

What is inside the foods you already eat

Why each one matters for your body

What to cut back on, and why

Foods for cramps, bloating, tiredness and more

Where supplements fit

Understanding your body changes everything.

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Food first, always

I do not eat kale and spirulina, and neither do you. This guide uses the food in your kitchen: beans, ugu, titus, oranges, groundnuts, moi moi.

For each food, you will learn three things: what is inside it, what that does in your body, and why it matters for how you feel.

> **An honest note.** The amount of each nutrient in Nigerian vegetables changes with the soil, the variety and how you cook it. So this guide says "ugu contains iron", never "ugu gives you a set amount". Some foods we love, like garden egg, waterleaf, bitter leaf, crayfish and zobo, are not in this guide yet, because I have not found a trusted nutrient source for them. I will add them once I have checked.

The everyday plate, according to WHO

What	WHO advice for adults
Fruit and vegetables	At least 400 g a day, about five portions. Yam, cassava, potatoes and other starchy roots do not count toward this.
Salt	Under 5 g a day, about one level teaspoon, from all your food.
Sugar	Free sugars under 10% of your energy, about 12 level teaspoons a day. Less is even better.
Fats	Avoid industrial trans fats.

Source: WHO healthy diet fact sheet.

The nutrients, one by one

Iron: for energy and healthy blood

What it does	Your body uses iron to make haemoglobin, the part of your red blood cells that carries oxygen. Low iron means less oxygen reaches your body, and that can leave you tired.
Why it matters for you	Heavy periods drain iron over time. In Nigeria's 2018 national survey, 58% of women aged 15 to 49 were anaemic, and iron deficiency is the most common nutritional cause. Women aged 19 to 50 need about 18 mg a day.
Nigerian foods	Liver, beef and fish carry the kind of iron your body absorbs easily. Beans, other legumes and ugu carry plant iron, which is harder to absorb.
What helps	Vitamin C. Eat plant iron with tomatoes, fresh pepper or an orange.
What gets in the way	Tea, coffee, cocoa (like Milo) and calcium. Keep them away from your iron meal.
Be careful	Do not start iron tablets on a guess. A blood test comes first.

Vitamin C: the helper

What it does	Vitamin C helps your body make collagen, a protein that helps wounds heal. It helps your body absorb iron from plant foods, and it helps your immune system work. Your body cannot make it, so it must come from food.
Why it matters for you	It is the key that opens the door for plant iron. Adult women need about 75 mg a day. One medium orange has about 70 mg.
Nigerian foods	Oranges, fresh pepper and tatashe, tomatoes, ugu.
What helps	Eating some fruit raw, and adding ugu near the end of cooking.
What gets in the way	Heat and long storage. Vitamin C dissolves in water and is destroyed by heat.
Be careful	For most people, vitamin C supplements do not stop colds.

Folate: for building new cells

What it does	Folate is a B vitamin your body uses to build new cells. Folic acid is the form used in tablets.
Why it matters for you	Enough folic acid before and early in pregnancy lowers the risk of birth defects such as spina bifida. Adult women need 400 micrograms a day, and 600 in pregnancy.
Nigerian foods	Ugu and other dark leafy greens, beans and black eyed peas (moi moi and akara), groundnuts, oranges, liver.
What helps	A varied plate every day.
What gets in the way	Eating the same few foods every day. Variety keeps you covered.
Be careful	If you could become pregnant, ask your pharmacist about folic acid before you conceive. Higher doses only on a doctor's advice.

Omega 3 fats: the fish fats

What it does	There are three main omega 3 fats. ALA comes from plant oils. EPA and DHA come from fish. Your body turns only very small amounts of ALA into EPA and DHA, so fish is the practical way to get them.
Why it matters for you	Eating fish is linked to better heart health. Some studies suggest omega 3 fats may ease period pain a little, though not for everyone.
Nigerian foods	Titus (mackerel), sardines, shawa (herring). Canned sardines in oil are rich in EPA and DHA.
What helps	Fish in your stew or soup, about twice a week.
What gets in the way	Simply not eating fish often. Many of us eat it less than we think.
Be careful	High dose fish oil may raise bleeding risk with blood thinners.

Magnesium: the everyday mineral

What it does	Your body uses magnesium every day, in many of its basic jobs.
Why it matters for you	Women need about 310 to 320 mg a day from all sources. Most of it can come from food.
Nigerian foods	Beans, groundnuts, ugu and other green leafy vegetables, millet, brown rice.
What helps	Whole grains and legumes in most meals.
What gets in the way	Very high zinc supplements can reduce magnesium absorption.
Be careful	Magnesium from supplements should stay under 350 mg a day. Too much can cause diarrhoea.

Zinc: small but needed

What it does	Zinc is a mineral your body needs in small amounts every day.
Why it matters for you	Women need about 8 mg a day. The upper limit is 40 mg from all sources.
Nigerian foods	Beef, chicken, crab, periwinkle and other seafood. Beans and groundnuts have some.
What helps	Animal foods, because the body absorbs zinc from them more easily than from plants.
What gets in the way	Zinc can reduce how well some antibiotics are absorbed. Space them apart as your pharmacist advises.
Be careful	Do not start zinc tablets on a guess. Too much lowers copper and magnesium.

Fibre: for a happy gut

What it does	Fibre helps form soft, bulky stool, which keeps your gut moving.
Why it matters for you	Adults need about 22 to 34 g a day. A slow gut can leave you feeling full, heavy and bloated.
Nigerian foods	Beans, black eyed peas, oats, whole grains, fruit and vegetables.
What helps	Water and other drinks, so the fibre can work.
What gets in the way	Chips, fast food and processed snacks have little or no fibre.
Be careful	Add fibre slowly. Too much too fast can cause gas and bloating at first.

Eat for how you feel

If you have	Eat more of	Why
Period cramps	Titus, sardines, shawa. Ginger in pepper soup or tea.	Omega 3 fats from fish. Research suggests ginger may reduce period cramps.
The week before your period	Small, light meals. Beans, groundnuts, greens.	Steady energy and magnesium. Light meals are easier on a bloated belly.
Bloating or a slow gut	Beans, moi moi, oats, fruit, vegetables, plus water.	Fibre keeps your gut moving. Add it slowly.
Tiredness or heavy periods	Liver, beef, fish, beans, ugu, with tomato, pepper or orange.	Iron for your blood, and vitamin C to help absorb it. Get a blood test too.
Preparing for a baby	Ugu, beans, moi moi, groundnuts, oranges.	Folate for building new cells. Ask your pharmacist about folic acid.

What to cut back on, and why

Cut back on	Why
Tea, coffee or Milo with your main meal	They slow iron absorption. Keep the drink, just move it between meals.
Seasoning cubes and extra salt	WHO advises under 5 g of salt a day. In a study of Nigerian adults, about a fifth of their sodium came from bouillon cubes, and two thirds came from home cooked meals. Use half the cubes and add onion, garlic, ginger or pepper.
Fizzy drinks and chewing gum	They make you swallow more air, which causes gas and bloating.
Very fatty meals	They can slow your stomach and leave you bloated.

Cut back on	Why
Chips, fast food and processed snacks	Little or no fibre, which can slow your gut.
Sugary drinks	WHO advises keeping free sugars under about 12 teaspoons a day. One soft drink can use up much of that.

One easy Naija day

This is an example to give you ideas, not a strict meal plan. Swap in what you like and what you can afford.

Meal	Idea	What it brings
Breakfast	Moi moi with an orange, or oats with groundnuts and a banana.	Folate, fibre, vitamin C.
Lunch	Beans and plantain with a fresh tomato and pepper sauce.	Plant iron with vitamin C, fibre, magnesium.
Snack	A handful of groundnuts and a fruit.	Magnesium, folate, vitamin C.
Dinner	Vegetable soup with ugu and titus, with a moderate swallow.	Iron, omega 3 fats, folate.
Drinks	Water through the day. Tea or Milo between meals, not with them.	Better iron absorption.

Cooking tips: add ugu near the end of cooking to keep more vitamin C. Use half your usual cubes. Put your spoon down between bites.

Where supplements fit

Food comes first. Supplements fill gaps. They never replace a good plate, a blood test or a doctor. I have used all four products below myself.

Product	Where it may fit	Check first if you
Omega 3 Plus	If fish is rare on your plate. A fish oil with EPA and DHA, 3 capsules a day with meals.	Are allergic to fish, take a blood thinner, or are pregnant.
Pro Vitality	Daily support alongside good food. One sachet a day with a meal, combining fish oil, Tre en en grain oils, carotenoids and a vitamin and mineral tablet.	Smoke, take a blood thinner, or are allergic to fish, soya or wheat.
CoQ10	NeoLife says it supports heart health and cellular energy. 2 capsules a day with food.	Take warfarin, or are pregnant.
Feminine Herbal Complex	A 10 herb blend made for women's cyclical needs, according to NeoLife. 1 tablet morning and night.	Are pregnant, use birth control pills, take any medicine, or have high blood pressure, heart or kidney problems.

Cross checks before you mix

- Keep calcium supplements and iron at different times of day.
- Calcium and iron pills can cause constipation. Tell your doctor if you are bloated.
- More fibre? Add it slowly, with water.
- Fish oil and blood thinners: ask your doctor first.
- Pregnant, breastfeeding, or on any medicine or family planning: ask your doctor or pharmacist before any supplement.

Want help putting this on your own plate? Send me a message with the word CHECKIN. I am here to help and support you, not to diagnose or treat.

With love, Lillian

Sources

WHO healthy diet fact sheet and anaemia fact sheet; NIH Office of Dietary Supplements fact sheets on iron, vitamin C, folate, omega 3, magnesium and zinc; MedlinePlus iron in diet; NIDDK diet for constipation and gas; NCCIH ginger; CDC folic acid guidance; Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2018; a study of sodium sources in Nigerian adults; Nigerian studies on fluted pumpkin (ugu) nutrients. Full links are in the Neu Woman fact files.