

Foods, not specific nutrients, may be key to good health

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In a recent academic review, a University of Minnesota professor in the School of Public Health has concluded that food, as opposed to specific nutrients, may be key to having a healthy diet.

This notion is contrary to popular practice in food industry and government, where marketers and regulators tend to focus on total fat, carbohydrate and protein and on specific vitamins and added supplements in food products, not the food items as a whole. The research is published in last month's *Journal of Nutrition Reviews*.

“We are confusing ourselves and the public by talking so much about nutrients when we should be talking about foods,” said David Jacobs, Ph.D., the principal investigator and Mayo Professor of Public Health at the University of Minnesota. “Consumers get the idea that diet and health can be understood in terms of isolated nutrients. It’s not the best approach, and it might be wrong.”

Jacobs, with coauthor Professor Linda Tapsell of the University of Wollongong in Australia, argues that people should shift the focus toward the benefits of entire food products and food patterns in order to better understand nutrition in regard to a healthy human body.

They focus on the concept of food synergy – the idea that more information about the impact of human health can be obtained by looking at whole foods than a single food component (such as vitamin C, or calcium added to a container of orange juice).

Jacobs and Tapsell provide several examples in which the single nutrient approach to nutrition has not proved to benefit health:

Long term randomized clinical trials, considered the gold standard for making judgments about nutritional treatment and health, have failed to show benefit or have suggested harm for cardiovascular events for isolated supplements of beta-carotene and B-vitamins. A similar large experiment in total fat reduction also did not show benefit. In contrast, myriad observations have been made of improved long-term health for foods and food patterns that incorporate these same nutrients naturally occurring in food.

An understanding of the interactions between food components in both single foods and whole diets opens up new areas of thinking that appear to have greater application to contemporary population health issues, particularly those related to chronic lifestyle disease, Jacobs said.

“It is this new understanding that reminds us emphatically of the central position of food in the nutrition-health interface, which begs for much more whole food-based research, and encourages us in both research and dietary advice to, ‘think food first’,” Tapsell said.

Source: University of Minnesota

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