

On Nutrition: Signals to listen to for better health

March 25 2022, by Barbara Intermill



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My husband beeps his tractor when he drives by the house these mornings on his way to feed cattle. It's his way to say he's thinking about me.

One of my patients, who is working very hard to plan more meals at home and visit Mickey D's less often, reports she feels lighter and less bloated these days—a sign that her body is happy with her new habits.

We have signals all around us. Some that protect us, like [traffic lights](#). Others point us in the right direction, like road signs. Life runs smoother when we obey them. And when we don't, we suffer consequences.

Signals can also encourage or prompt us to make changes. That is certainly the case in my own life. I know without a doubt that a higher number on my bathroom scale is directly correlated to more frequent nibbles from the M&M's jar on my kitchen counter.

Our [food](#) choices may even prompt our bodies to feel more or less pain, according to emerging research. Here's the connection: Inflammation occurs when the body is injured or hurting in some way. And [inflammation](#) leads to pain.

Some components in food help calm inflammation and others promote it. In other words, experts now think our [food choices](#) can potentially ease or aggravate certain types of pain such as [migraine headaches](#), osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia and bursitis.

Omega-3 fats in fish and walnuts for example, are anti-inflammatory; they send signals to reduce inflammation. Vegetables and fruits (especially berries and cherries) also contain an array of substances that calm inflammation in the body.

On the other hand, foods like my precious M&M's, which are loaded with saturated fat and sugar, may actually contribute to chronic pain. Darn.

What about beef? A recent study in which volunteers ate eight ounces of

beef a day for 32 days found an increase in some [inflammatory markers](#). Yet they also found reduced amounts of other inflammatory signals, meaning a potential for reduced pain and inflammation.

What this means is really what we've known all along. The most healthful diets are those that include a balanced variety of foods eaten in moderation. In other words, my precious M&M's are an occasional treat, not lunch. And we need to continue piling on the veggies with our lean beef, fish, poultry or other high protein foods.

Remember, it's the effect of one's total eating pattern that has the most lasting impact on health. An all-carrot diet is no better for us than an all-steak diet. It's the wonderful interaction between nutrients from a vast array of foods that gives us the most lasting health benefits. And that's the best signal of all.

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Citation: On Nutrition: Signals to listen to for better health (2022, March 25) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-nutrition-health.html>

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