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Good nutrition starts with the basics

March 15 2012, By John Messmer

March brings another National Nutrition Month. We Americans have unlimited sources of dietary information and frequent reminders about weight, diets, nutrition and food. Look at the magazine rack at the supermarket, the large sections devoted to cooking and food in bookstores and on Amazon.com, or search for “nutrition” on the Web and it’s all there. Yet two-thirds of us are too heavy, heart disease remains a major disease and diabetes is increasing.

One part of the problem is the quantity of food we eat. Portions are bigger at restaurants, and there are far more fast food choices than a generation ago. But even at home we are not choosing healthy foods.

Nutrition professionals can be very valuable in helping people plan healthy diets, but you do not need a degree in nutrition science to know how to eat.

Start with:

Vegetables and fruits

These should be the foundation of each meal. Too often, animal products provide the majority of the calories. We should try to include five to eight servings of fruit and vegetables of many different colors in our daily diets. So instead of two eggs, bacon and home fries, consider one egg plus one egg white omelet with chopped vegetables (broccoli, peppers, onions, etc.) with either Canadian bacon OR turkey bacon. Skip the fried potatoes.

Included in vegetables and fruits are various starchy types: potato, corn, peas, bananas, and so on. These can be part of the menu, but avoid adding more oil through frying, and be sure to keep these as just a part of your vegetable and fruit choices. Include all sorts of vegetables and fruits throughout the week. Half your total volume of food should be vegetables and fruits.

By the way, fruit juices are not fruits. Even 100 percent pure fruit juice is too high in its own natural sugar and is the nutritional equivalent of soda with added vitamins.

Grains

This group includes the traditional rice, corn, oats and wheat, but many other grains are now available in stores including quinoa, triticale, amaranth, millet, barley and rye. Many of these are typically milled into flour and used for bread. Although bread can be a small part of our diets, the less refined the better. Whole grains are best but be careful. We eat entirely too much bread and pasta and other baked goods (cookies, cakes, etc.). Although whole grains provide fiber and other nutrients, they are converted into sugar and the excess into fat, which contributes to weight gain and its associated problems. Grain products should be less than one-quarter of our food.

Proteins

Beans and lentils, soy, nuts and seeds, eggs, seafood, and land animals are the strongest sources of protein. Milk and milk products, such as yogurt, are also a good source and provide calcium; lowfat is best – the protein and calcium are the same but the fat content is less.

Any lean cut of meat is fine, but a 3- to 4-ounce serving is enough.

Avoid organ meats since they tend to be high in fat. Weekly, about 8 ounces of fish adds essential omega-3 fats to our diet. Avoid frying other than stir-frying; done correctly, stir-frying adds only a little oil. Breading soaks up oils and adds only calories, not nutrition. So while fish is a good choice, breaded and fried fish is not.

Oils

We usually do not have to seek out oils to add to our diets. Oils are fats and all have the same number of calories, but some are less likely to raise cholesterol levels. Solid fats are generally not a good choice. Nuts and seeds and oily fruits like olives and avocados provide some oils. If used in cooking or salads, canola, corn, olive, safflower and other poly- or monounsaturated oils are best. A little butter is fine from time to time, just don't overdo it.

There is no essential baked goods group or ice cream group or candy group or soda group in a healthy diet. And eating too much food, even if it's mostly healthy, is not good. Michael Pollan said it well: "Eat food, mostly plants. Not too much." It's really that simple. It's not that junk food is inherently bad; the problem is when it is in excess or it replaces nutritious foods. If you need to lose weight, including junk foods means leaving out good foods and if you don't cut down, you will not lose any weight.

There is a wealth of nutrition information provided free on the Web by the United States Department of Agriculture at Nutrition.gov and by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (formerly the American Dietetic Association) at eatright.org. A good diet is the first step toward a great, healthy body.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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