

Improved diet, better results

By ERIN FAGAN

I have to admit that, on writing about food and nutrition, I speak from some experience. Sometimes the things that stick with you for life are the lessons learned the hard way. If I can be considered a prototype university student with the typical health issues, then I have some good information to pass on.

It helps to look closely at the human connection to food in order to gain further appreciation of its importance. To eat is a non-negotiable and essential activity. I like to think of it as power, not only because it is a literal fuel but because individuals are, at least in part, the ones who decide what goes into the body and in what form.

Our diet has the ability to either build up our biological systems or to tear them down. It can revitalize our cells and organs, or it can slow us if poorly maintained.

And according to progressive research, certain foods can help prevent a variety of diseases and, if manipulated in a healthy way, prolong life. Certain foods, if overly consumed, can have the reverse effect. Knowledge about food and nutrition is, then, a form of empowerment.

As food is such an important part of life, it has become deeply entrenched into society and psychology. Eating can be a pleasurable taste treat, or a chore if we don't enjoy what we eat.

When we are children, we learn that food can serve as reward, consolation (think ice cream) or punishment. Eating is a highly social activity, particularly when we

consider such events as the Thanksgiving Feast and the commemorative element of food.

It is without surprise that our emotions become so intrinsically linked to eating.

When we are down, some of us have no appetite at all, and others use food to fight insatiable negative emotions. The influence of diet upon physical appearance, coupled with societal views on weight, adds to the incredible leverage that we can have on our own health and self esteem. These relationships with food can be harmful if depended upon too strongly.

Probably the two most important words to consider are **variety** and **moderation**. If you eat a regular, balanced diet with as great a range of food as possible and without extremes, then this will go a long way towards your health.

But how do you know if you are eating right? This is difficult considering the overwhelming amount of information available on the topic. While it is important to remember that the writer of this article is not a certified expert, I have compiled the most comprehensive collection I could find on important dietary issues.

Cravings and Other Needs

fat

This isn't such a dirty word after all, considering that this element of food provides the fatty acids needed to form many important bodily chemicals. Fats are a large part of our hormonal system (regulating emotions and a range of cycles), they insu-

late cells and lubricate joints, and they help us fight disease. Fat is also a form of fuel, and when not used it gets stored until needed.

We crave fat so much because our distant ancestors found it hard to come by. In order to ensure that they got enough, taste evolved to seek it out in the nuts, seeds and wild game they could come across. And because servings of fat were so relatively rare, it became one of the first things to be stored during the lean times. Now that we have domesticated animals, butter and margerine, diets have changed but our bodies haven't.

There are roughly four different types of fat, and opinions waver on the benefits and evils of each type. Probably the best rule of thumb to follow is the idea of moderation. The most commonly infamous of them are saturated fats (saturated with hydrogen), which largely come from animal products or tropical plant sources (eg. coconut oil). If overly consumed, they are most suspected to contribute to heart disease and high blood cholesterol.

Hydrogenated or trans-fatty acids, such as margerine, undergo a process to make them more solid, like butter. This can also be harmful if abused.

Polyunsaturated fats are less threatening because they tend to decrease "bad" cholesterol. However, these soybean and corn-related oils may also reduce "good" cholesterol, and over-use of these are not much better for health in the long run.

Monounsaturated fats, the most famous of which are olive oil and peanut oil, are

staples of the Mediterranean diet, where it has been recently discovered that people have reduced incidence of heart disease. If you are greatly concerned about your consumption of fat, this is probably the best area of oils to substitute with. If you wish to introduce a low-fat diet into your routine, it is far better to do so gradually by reduced intake of saturated fats (meat and animal products) and by not eliminating all fat from your meals.

Carbohydrates (including sugar)

If your diet depends heavily upon Kraft dinner, then you all ready know that carbs are cheap. This food component is most used for rapidly digestible energy and to build up cells. Because we have traditionally needed such things as sugar and starch, we have developed quite a taste for it. Great sources of sugar and starch can be found in fruits, vegetables and grains. If over eaten some, like potatoes and corn (in spite of overwhelming additional benefits) have a lot of calories.

If you expect a quick boost of energy, it is not wise to depend exclusively on a chocolate bar. Any up is usually followed by a down because pure sugar goes through the body very quickly. Fruits and vegetables are better snacks because they contain other nutrients which assist in maintaining energy.

There is such a thing as carbohydrate addiction, particularly if the diet consists strongly of high-carbohydrate foods (aka sweets and, my personal favorite, gratuitous amounts of choco-

late). To regulate the insulin levels involved in such extreme cravings, it helps to keep to a three-meal-a-day plan with small, non-sugary snacks in between.

The brain is particularly greedy, because it largely has first dibs on any glucose in the body for its own maintenance. One interesting finding is that the brain absorbs carbohydrates best in the morning, so this gives a big boost to the importance of breakfast. This probably doesn't mean that you should subsist entirely on Count Chocula and Cocoa Puffs every morning -- moderation and variety is better. The brain is also quite a connoisseur of fish and folic acid.

Protein

This is a critical part of the diet, but we don't need quite as much as we have probably assumed. We are dependent on food to get all of the amino acids we need from protein, which works to build and repair tissue, participate in virtually all cellular functions, and balances many internal systems. Like most of the things discussed so far, too much is a bad thing and too little is equally bad.

One suggestion is to include meat (particularly the red variety) in only one meal a day and to sample from other sources of proteing for variety. If you do not eat meat, the alternatives in existance are very important for getting whatever protein you need.

Vitamins and Minerals

In summary, the best

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