

How to achieve a balanced diet

EATING HEALTHY DOESN'T MEAN YOU HAVE TO SACRIFICE YOUR FAVOURITE FOODS. JUST ENSURE THAT YOUR DAILY MEALS ENCOMPASS THE FIVE MAIN FOOD GROUPS AND YOU ARE GOOD TO GO

A BALANCED diet is the key to good health. Choosing the right kind of foods will provide your body with all the nutrients it needs to grow, repair and carry out the body's metabolic function.

On the other hand, eating the wrong foods will cause the body to accumulate toxins which, if left untreated, could result in chronic diseases. Therefore, a balanced and nutritious diet is important to prevent you from getting sick.

To get a balanced diet, you need to include the right amount of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals and fibres in your food every day.

Carbohydrates are the body's preferred source of energy as they are easily broken down into glucose, simple sugars that fuel the body with instant energy. Carbohydrates can be found in starchy foods like oats, bread, rice, pasta and potatoes, as well as fruits and vegetables.

Proteins also supply the body with energy to perform physical work but their main purpose is to repair damaged tissues and generate the growth of new cells.

Protein is needed in very small quantities and any excess protein not utilised by the body is converted into glucose and stored as fat.

So it's not a good idea to eat too much protein if you don't exercise that often.

Meat, eggs, milk and cheese are high in protein but they also contain a lot of fat. Plant proteins like beans, peas, lentils, oats and wheat are healthier options as they consist of protein and very little fat.

Having said that, the body does need a certain amount of fat to insulate the skin and protect the organs.

Fats are also necessary for the absorption of fat soluble vitamins - A, D, E and K.

Vitamins and minerals are required in small doses as they play an important role in protecting the body against infection and disease.

As many of these nutrients get dissolved in water or destroyed by heat, it is important to eat lots of raw fruit and vegetables and cut down on boiled or deep-fried food.

Fibre has no nutritional value as the body cannot digest or absorb it but it helps

to absorb dangerous substances inside our system and eliminate waste products faster and more efficiently. A diet high in fibre found in oats, hi-fibre crackers, wholemeal bread, beans, fruits and vegetables helps to prevent constipation and keep the digestive tract healthy.

FOOD PYRAMID

No single food group can provide all the nourishment our body needs. In order to obtain the essential vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre required to keep the body free from illness, we have to consume food from all the five food groups. Moreover, eating a variety of foods makes mealtimes more interesting.

The five main food groups are grains; dairy; fruits and vegetables; meat, poultry and fish; and fats and oils. The serving size for each food group will depend on your age, gender, size and how physically active you are. But as a rule of thumb, you should have four servings of grains, two servings of dairy products, four or more servings of fresh fruits and vegetables, one to two servings of meat, fish and alternatives, and a small serving of fat.

GRAINS

Right at the bottom of the food pyramid are cereals, crackers, wholemeal bread, rice and pasta. These should make up the bulk of your diet especially if you engage in sports activities or manual labour.

Oats provide you with carbohydrates to give you energy, and fibre to help your intestines function efficiently. To sweeten a breakfast of oats, choose the natural sweetness found in fruit rather than refined sugar or honey.

When buying bread or grains, scan the list of ingredients and look for the word 'whole' before the grain name. Whole oats, wholemeal, and whole wheat are more nutritious because it is made from the whole grain, including the outer shell which contains valuable vitamins and fibre.

Opt for brown rice over white rice as the former contains more fibre while the latter has been stripped of nutrients to make it appear more palatable and attractive.

DAIRY

Dairy products like milk, yoghurt and cheese are rich in calcium and help to build strong bones and teeth.

If you're lactose intolerant, choose lactose-free products or find other calcium-rich choices such as almonds and white sesame seeds. Butter, eggs and hard cheeses won't do much harm if eaten occasionally but if you're worried, opt for skimmed milk, low-fat yoghurt and soft cheeses

like camembert which contain less fat than hard cheeses.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

Vary your vegetables - dark, leafy greens, orange vegetables like carrots and pumpkins, red and yellow bell peppers - so that you'll get a different range of vitamins and minerals. Similarly, eating fruits from a variety of colour categories - red, green, orange-yellow, blue-purple and white - will provide you with more phytonutrients (plant nutrients) than eating fruits from the same colour category.

Choose fresh fruits over canned or dried fruit and eat them raw rather than cooked for maximum food value. If you get hungry in between meals and want something to nibble on, try carrot and celery sticks, apples, bananas and dried apricot rather than unhealthy snacks and sweets.

MEAT, POULTRY AND FISH

This food group sits right at the top of the food pyramid as you don't need much of it to stay healthy. Most people get plenty of meat and poultry but need to make leaner choices as too much fatty meat can lead to high cholesterol and heart problems.

Steam, grill or bake rather than fry. Most of the fat from poultry can be found in the skin, so remove the skin before cooking.

If you're a vegetarian, replace your protein requirements from meat with beans, nuts and seeds.

FATS AND OILS

A diet high in fat is unhealthy but a diet devoid of fat will leave your skin feeling dry and scaly. Choose healthy fats like olive oil, or eat oily fish such as salmon, tuna and mackerel that are rich in omega 3-fatty acids to help combat cholesterol.

EATING SENSIBLY

Whenever possible, eat fresh foods rather than refined and processed foods which rob the body of vital nutrients and increases your intake of fat, sugar, additives and preservatives. The occasional cake, ice cream and carbonated drink won't do much harm but should not form a regular part of your diet.

Eat more raw fruits and fresh vegetables to step up your fibre intake, boost your immune system and ensure a rich supply of vitamins and minerals.

Feeding your body with a balanced diet helps to satisfy your nutrient requirements which lead to a satisfied appetite, a leaner body and more energy. To get more oats and fruits into your diet, snack on wholesome oatmeal biscuits filled with fruits bursting with flavour. This is a scrumptious way to enjoy good nutrition and great taste.

