

- Eating customs

## THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD NUTRITION

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Daily Mirror (Sri Lanka) · 9 May 2024 · 02 · BY KSHALINI NONIS

People with healthy eating patterns live longer and are at lower risk of serious health problems. Good nutrition means that your body gets all the nutrients, vitamins and minerals it needs to work at its best. We had a chat with Dr. Manoji Gamage, Consultant Nutrition Physician, at the Nutrition Division / Castle Street Hospital for WOMEN/NINDT.



### Q WHAT IS A NUTRITIOUS DIET AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The body is a living unit which needs an external fuel source to provide energy and substances for growth, repair and wellbeing. A nutritious diet is one that could provide these elements in required and safe amounts. A nutritious diet doesn't mean one meal but an intake that spans throughout the day and is a healthy eating style.

### Q WHAT COMPRISES A NUTRITIOUS DIET FOR THE FOLLOWING GROUPS OF PEOPLE? 1. Children

A nutritious diet for children should include a variety of foods from all the food groups to ensure they are getting a wide range of essential nutrients for growth and development. Some key components of a healthy diet for children include:

- y Grains: Include whole grain foods like rice, whole wheat bread, yams, natural cereals to provide energy, fiber and essential nutrients.
- y Protein: Include lean sources of protein such as poultry, fish, beans, and nuts to support muscle growth and repair.
- y Fruits and vegetables: Encourage children to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables in different colours to ensure they are getting a range of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants.
- y Dairy: Include low-fat or non-fat dairy products like milk, yoghurt, and cheese for calcium and vitamin D for strong bones and teeth.
- y Limit sugary and processed foods: Minimise the intake of sugary drinks, snacks, and processed foods high in salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats.
- y Encourage water: Ensure children are drinking plenty of water throughout the day to stay hydrated and avoid sugary beverages.

It is important to teach children about portion control and moderation, as well as the importance of balanced meals and snacks and avoiding skipping of breakfast. It is also recommended to involve children in meal planning and preparation to encourage healthy eating habits.

## 2. Pregnant mums

A nutritious diet for pregnant mothers should include a balance of essential nutrients to support the health of both the mother and the developing baby. But that doesn't mean you have to eat for two as the common myth in the society.

Some key components of a healthy diet for pregnant women include:

- **Fruits and vegetables:** Aim to consume a variety of colourful fruits and vegetables to ensure you are getting a range of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. At least 5 portions per day is advisable.
- **Starchy food (carbohydrates):** are an

important source of energy. Choose whole grains such as brown rice, quinoa, whole wheat bread, and oats to provide fiber and essential nutrients.

- **These foods should make up just over a third of the food you eat.**
- **Too much starch specially refined ones like bakery products and sweets can give rise to high blood sugars.**
- **Lean protein:** Include sources of lean protein in your diet such as lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, nuts, seeds, and legumes.
- **Make sure to cook meat or fish properly to prevent gastroenteritis which can be harmful to the mother and the baby.**
- **Dairy products:** Include dairy products such as milk, yoghurt, and cheese for calcium and vitamin D to support bone health.
- **Healthy fats:** Include sources of healthy fats such as avocado, nuts, seeds, and olive oil to support brain development in the baby instead of unhealthy fat in processed food and deep-fried food items.
- **Iron-rich foods:** Consume iron-rich foods such as lean meats, poultry, fish, legumes, and dark leafy greens to support healthy blood production.

- **Folate-rich foods:** Include foods high in folate such as leafy greens, citrus fruits, and fortified cereals to support proper neural tube development in the baby. Taking the regular folate pill is also very important.
- **It is also important for pregnant mothers to stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water throughout the day.**
- **Fad diets, skipping meals, intermittent fasting should be avoided to assure good growth of the baby. It is important to take healthy snacks if feeling hungry eg fruits, pulses, cereals.**

Eat a variety of food, as it is proven that tastes and flavours cross the placenta and help the baby to like a variety of food once born.

## 3. Those involved in sports

Good nutrition in sports is essential for optimal performance and recovery. Athletes should focus on consuming a balanced diet that includes a variety of nutrient-dense foods such as lean proteins, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats. It's important to stay hydrated and fuel your body with the right nutrients before, during, and after exercise to support energy levels, muscle function, and overall health.

Additionally, timing meals and snacks around training sessions can help maximise performance and promote faster recovery.

Before training, you should aim to consume a balanced meal that includes carbohydrates for energy, protein for muscle repair, and some healthy fats. A complete meal should be taken 3-4 hours before, letting it digest well. Closer to the training or the competition easily digestible snacks such as banana with milk, yoghurt with granola, or a chicken sandwich should be consumed.

During training, it's essential to stay hydrated by drinking water or a sports drink with electrolytes. You may also benefit from consuming easily digestible carbohydrates like, fruit smoothies, raisins or fruit cuts to maintain energy levels if the sessions are longer than one hour.

After training, your body needs nutrients to help repair muscles and replenish energy stores. A postworkout meal or snack should include protein for muscle recovery and carbohydrates to replenish glycogen stores. Examples could be a protein shake with fruit, a fish sandwich, or a chicken wrap with veggies.

Remember, everyone's nutritional needs are different, so it's essential to listen to your body and adjust your nutrition plan accordingly. If you have specific dietary requirements or goals, consider consulting with a specialist in nutrition.

#### 4. Older people

A healthy diet is important for elders to maintain good overall health and well-being. Some key components of good nutrition for elders include:

- y Protein-rich foods such as lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, and legumes to help maintain muscle mass and strength.
- y Protein requirement for elders is higher than for young adults as they need to combat muscle wasting with age. Elders should include protein sources to all meals.
- y Fruits and vegetables rich in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants to support immune function and overall health. It will help relieve Gastrointestinal illnesses such as constipation.
- y Whole grains such as brown rice, whole wheat bread, and quinoa for fibre and energy in controlled amounts is needed to maintain a healthy weight
- y Dairy products or dairy alternatives for calcium and vitamin D to support bone health.
- y Healthy fats from sources such as nuts, seeds, avocados, and olive oil for heart health.
- y Adequate hydration through water, herbal teas, and other low-calorie beverages to support digestion and overall function.

It is also important for elders to limit processed and high-sugar foods, and to be mindful of portion sizes to support weight management and overall health. Being active until as much as possible will keep elderly in good health.

#### Q WHAT ARE YOUR COMMENTS ABOUT SOME EATING A GOOD BREAKFAST VERSUS 16 HOUR INTERMITTENT DIETS THAT PEOPLE ARE DOING?

A good breakfast can provide essential nutrients and energy to start your day, may help regulate blood sugar levels, and can prevent overeating later in the day. It's important to choose a balanced breakfast that includes a combination of protein, healthy fats, and carbohydrates. The importance of a breakfast is proven especially for children.

Intermittent fasting, on the other hand, involves cycling between periods of eating and fasting. Some potential benefits of intermittent fasting include weight loss, improved metabolism, and better blood sugar control. However, it may not be suitable for everyone and can be challenging for some people to stick with. If this may be practiced avoiding the dinner it would be better than skipping the breakfast.

Ultimately, the best approach is to choose the option that works best for you and fits into your lifestyle and dietary preferences.

It may be helpful to consult with a nutrition specialist to determine the best approach for you.

#### Q WHAT FOOD MUST YOU AVOID TO KEEP CHOLESTEROL AWAY?

Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in the blood and in every cell of the body.

It is necessary for the body to function properly, but high levels of cholesterol can increase the risk of heart disease and stroke.

To minimise intake of cholesterol, you can:

- y Choose lean cuts of meat and poultry: Opt for lean cuts of meat and poultry, and remove skin from poultry before cooking.
- y Fish is the leanest among the animal

proteins and should be promoted.

- y Eat more plant-based foods: Include more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nuts in your diet. These foods are naturally cholesterol-free.
- y Limit saturated

and trans fats: These fats can increase your cholesterol levels, so try to limit your intake of foods high in saturated and trans fats, such as red meat, full-fat dairy products, and processed foods. y Choose low-fat dairy products:

Opt for low-fat or fat-free dairy products to reduce your intake of cholesterol and saturated fat. y

Cook with healthy oils: Use olive oil, canola oil, or other healthy oils when cooking instead of butter or lard. Limit the use of coconut oil. y Avoid processed and fried foods: Processed and fried foods are often high in cholesterol and unhealthy fats, so try to limit your intake of these types of foods. y

Read food labels: Pay attention to food labels and choose products that are low in cholesterol and saturated fat.

By making these dietary changes and incorporating regular exercise into your routine, you can help lower your cholesterol levels and reduce your risk of heart disease.

**Q WHAT ARE SOME OF THE PATTERNS OF UNHEALTHY EATING, LIKE FOR INSTANCE WHY ARE SO MANY PEOPLE DIABETIC IN SRI LANKA?**

Unhealthy food patterns include eating too much and too often. Choosing refined products and high-calorie highly processed food for the taste and convenience of it are other bad food habits.

A person should learn to eat what he/she spends. After all the body needs food only to maintain its functions. But we as humans unlike other animals have the luxury of eating for pleasure. Therefore, we easily exceed the capacity the body is designed to tolerate. When nutrient flow is excess for a long-time, organ systems are damaged specially with regards to high glucose.

Diabetes occurs in general, when the pancreas which secretes the well-known hormone insulin cannot tackle or is tired of tackling high sugar loads. Therefore, preventing diabetes is easy when we know how much to eat. This is a self-discipline that all of us should cultivate.

**Q WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF TAKING DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS TO AID NUTRITION?**

Dietary supplements are products formulated for special medical needs and should be considered as a medicine. It can give very beneficial results if it is prescribed for the right reason for the right duration. Therefore, one must not use them as over-the-counter products rather get advice from a medical professional before use.

**Q HOW DO YOU DEVELOP HEALTHY EATING HABITS?**

It is like any other good habit that we have developed. Think for yourself. Good practices usually are developed from the very beginning of one's life. First because your elders tell you to follow them and later because you for your self know that it gives a lot of protection for your life.

**Q WHAT ARE THE LOCAL FOODS THAT ARE GOOD FOR YOU?**

There is no particularly good food. In fact what I have seen is when you label foods as good food, people over consume that variety and get into trouble. Too much of anything is not good. However, what I should emphasise is that one must have a balanced diet. It should be mostly unprocessed, natural food.

Spices, onions and condiments are also important antioxidants and promote gut microbiota so they are good to be used in cooking in the natural form.

**Q WHAT ARE THE UNHEALTHY EATING HABITS IN SRI LANKA? ALSO WHAT CAUSES A SPIKE IN DIABETES AND OTHER ILLNESSES RELATED TO BAD FOOD HABITS?**

Skipping meals, eating too much at a time and eating high carbohydrate and fat food are causes of all non-communicable diseases. Alcohol and smoking pose the other risks. Reducing physical activity causes obesity and difficulty in maintaining weight. All of above are reasons for diabetes.