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What to eat when recovering from Covid-19

Eat right to heal and regain normalcy after fighting off Covid-19,

New Straits Times · 9 Nov 2021 · 1 · writes Ivy Cheah Hsiao Yong The writer is a dietitian at Gleneagles Hospital Penang

DURING illness and when recovering from Covid-19, some people may experience loss of appetite and reduced food intake. When unwell, it may become difficult to eat and drink properly due to many reasons, such as breathing difficulties, fatigue, changes in sense of taste and smell.



If intake is insufficient, our body will use its stores of energy, protein, vitamins and minerals. This leads to weight loss, which includes loss of muscle mass and strength.

Proper nutrition and timely intervention can aid recovery. Here are some tips.

GET ENOUGH PROTEIN

Protein plays an important role in our body's immune response and help repair body tissues during recovery.

Dietary protein intake in combination with resistance exercise is necessary to regain loss of muscle mass and strength. Vitamins and minerals help these processes along.

When recovering from Covid-19, you may need to consume more protein than you usually do (unless indicated otherwise, such as in cases of renal failure).

Dietary sources of protein are fish, meat, poultry, eggs, beans, legumes, milk and dairy products. Aim to have a protein source in all main meals, such as breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Prioritise protein and have small but frequent meals, especially when appetite is still low.

Supplemental drinks may be helpful if you are eating less than usual due to breathing difficulties, fatigue or any other reason.

FLUID INTAKE

Equally important is adequate fluid since water helps carry oxygen and nutrients throughout the body.

Staying hydrated ensures our body's systems and organs function properly. Adequate fluid intake also prevents constipation due to being less physically active or as a side effect of certain medication.

An adult should generally drink at least two litres of fluids per day unless under restriction. This includes soups, tea, milk, moist food, juices, supplemental drinks and, of course,

water.

Drink throughout the day and avoid drinking too much before or during meals so that you are not too full to eat.

Choose milk, soymilk or milk-based drinks as these provide additional nutrients like protein.

CHANGES IN TASTE AND SMELL

Loss of taste and/or smell occurs in about one in five persons recovering from Covid-19. This affects how we experience flavours in the food we eat since it is a combination of taste and smell sensations. This can further aggravate the loss of appetite in some people.

A recent study published in the Journal of Internal Medicine found that 75 to 85 per cent of Covid-19 patients have recovered their sense of taste and smell by their twomonth follow-up visit. In other words, the loss of taste and smell is only temporary.

During recovery, include stronger flavours in meals, such as mint sauce, tomato chutney, lime and pickles, to help improve palatability.

Use more natural herbs and spices in cooking and marinades to elevate flavours instead of relying heavily on salt and sugar.

This is especially crucial for people with comorbidities, such as diabetes, hypertension and renal disease.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

Fruits and vegetables are the most abundant sources of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

Various micronutrients, such as vitamins A, C, D, E, B2, B6, and B12, folic acid, iron, selenium and zinc are essential for the body's immune response. A deficiency in any specific nutrient impairs the body's ability to fight infections.

Adequate daily intake of fruits and vegetables is required during recovery from a Covid-19 infection.

Aim for three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruits daily. Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables to obtain the nutrients your body requires.

Multivitamin and multimineral supplementation is not necessary unless one is deficient and should only be considered if one is unable to eat all the recommended food groups for an extended period.

Proper nutrition intake helps in the recovery from any infection, including Covid-19. Having a good intake of protein and nutrient-rich foods supports the regain of muscle strength and function, maintains the immune system, and increases energy levels to allow you to return to your usual activities.

Certain nutritional strategies may be helpful to ensure sufficient intake while coping with the side effects of Covid-19 infection.

Nevertheless, no two people's needs are the same. Consult your dietitian for advice on your intake adequacy and personalised strategies to achieve your nutritional needs.