- Nutrition

The right pair

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GOOD nutrition is not just about hitting single nutrient targets or making sure you are eating the latest superfood. It is about getting the right balance of nutrients to ensure that your body has what it needs for growth, metabolism and repair, and to support overall well-being.



Interestingly, certain food pairings can impact the body's ability to make use of nutrients they contain.

Herbalife senior director of worldwide nutrition education and training, Susan Bowerman, says nutrition science recognises that certain food combinations can influence how well specific nutrients are absorbed and utilised by the body.

This means you can influence nutrient uptake by choosing thoughtful food combinations.

One of the easiest ways to do this is to mix it up and regularly consume a wide variety of healthy foods — rather than the same foods day after day.

"But there are some food combinations that can be more beneficial to the body than if you were to eat the foods separately," she says.

Getting the right nutrients can be challenging due to busy lifestyles, social and economic factors, and changing eating habits, but keep in mind that good nutrition is not about rigid rules.

It is about regularly providing your body with the nutrients it needs in ways that fit your lifestyle, says Bowerman.

The goal is not perfection but consistency, and by combining smart food pairings with healthy choices — including protein from both plant and animal sources, plenty of colourful fruits and vegetables, fibre-rich grains and healthy fats — you can create a sustainable approach that provides your body what it needs day after day.

Here are five smart food pairings and simple ways to incorporate them into everyday routines.

Deeply coloured vegetables like spinach, carrots, peppers and tomatoes contain carotenoids, naturally occurring plant compounds that not only give these foods their beautiful colours, but act as antioxidants too, says Bowerman. These compounds are fat soluble, meaning they are better absorbed when eaten with some fat.

You can add healthy fat in many ways: use olive oil to dress your salad, add a small amount of nuts or seeds to your cooked veggies or add some avocado and spinach to your smoothie. By doing so, your body can make better use of these beneficial antioxidants.

Iron supports oxygen transport and energy metabolism and can be found in both plant and animal sources. Heme iron, found in meat, poultry, fish and eggs, is absorbed efficiently, while nonheme iron from plant foods, like beans, lentils, spinach and grains, is absorbed less efficiently.

Vitamin C improves the absorption of non-heme iron. So, to boost your uptake of iron, try adding tomatoes to chilli, citrus segments to a spinach salad, or strawberries to fortified cereal to help your body absorb non-heme iron.

Green tea contains beneficial plant compounds called catechins that function as antioxidants. Adding lemon to your tea or enjoying it alongside vitamin C-rich fruits (such as citrus, strawberries or kiwi) helps improve the absorption of these compounds.

“If green tea is part of your routine, pairing it with a balanced snack that includes some vitamin C is another great strategy. And, if your snack contains some protein and fibre, even better — it will help provide some sustained energy.”

So, enjoy your green tea along with a bit of Greek yoghurt and pineapple, or a fibre-enriched protein snack bar and a handful of berries.

Vitamin D is essential for helping the body absorb calcium, which supports bone health and muscle function.

Fatty fish — such as salmon and mackerel — provide vitamin D and so do eggs, while leafy greens, dairy and fortified plant-based beverages provide calcium. Pairing these foods supports optimal calcium utilisation, so have a mixed green salad with your grilled fish, or fold some spinach into your scrambled eggs.

Bowerman says for those who do not regularly consume animal foods, fortified products or supplements that provide vitamin D can help fill the gap. When combined with calciumrich foods from either plant or animal sources, they can help support your body’s needs.

Bowerman says even in countries with abundant sunlight like Malaysia, vitamin D deficiency remains common.

The 2024 National Health and Morbidity Survey on nutrition highlighted that nearly 64 per cent of the population had vitamin D levels below 50 nmol/L, despite ample sun exposure.

Many adults fall short on daily protein and fibre intake, and both are important for satiety. So, combining protein with high-fibre foods can help make meals more filling, while fibre also supports digestive health.

Pairing a colourful salad with tofu, beans, eggs, chicken or fish, for example, helps bring balance to a meal and makes it more satisfying.