- Eating customs

HABITS FOR HEALTHY EATING

Nutrition experts share their best tips on how to eat well

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Ask any reputable dietitian or nutrition scientist about how to eat healthfully and they will probably tell you to avoid dieting.



Many diets emphasise restriction, whether it's of calories, carbohydrates, fats or something else. And that's not a healthy strategy, said Alison Brown, a nutrition researcher at the National Institutes of Health. Diets like these can cause you to miss out on the range of nutrients your body requires, she said.

A better way to maintain healthy eating habits, she added, is to focus on foods that not only nourish, but also bring joy.

That can be challenging when nutrition fads are coming and going with seemingly increasing speed, and often conflicting advice. Is saturated fat the enemy or not? Are we all deficient in protein? Turns out, the best ways to foster healthy eating are also the simplest. Here's how.

1. PRIORITISE WHOLE FOODS

Not all processed foods are unhealthy, but they're often stripped of beneficial nutrients, Brown said. And they may contain high levels of ingredients that can be harmful to health, such as added sugars and sodium.

Because of this, it's best to consume foods "as close as possible to how they exist in nature", Brown said.

Whole foods such as fruits, vegetables and nuts are packed with many important nutrients. Fibre, for instance, is linked with reduced risks for heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and certain cancers. And

fruits and vegetables — especially leafy greens and berries — contain beneficial compounds that can reduce inflammation. In a recent study of nearly 50,000 women, scientists found that those who ate more whole grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes were more likely to age in a healthy way than those who ate fewer of those foods.

"The best foods don't have a nutrition label," said Christopher Gardner, a nutrition scientist and professor of medicine at Stanford.

2. EAT MORE HEALTHY FATS

During the 1980s, the dominant nutrition advice was to eat less fat. Yet researchers have since found that not all fats are bad. In fact, eating more unsaturated fats, found in foods such as nuts, avocados, fish and olive oil, can lower levels of low-density lipoprotein (or "bad") cholesterol in the blood, helping prevent heart attacks and strokes.

Saturated fats, on the other hand, which are found in animal products such as meat and dairy, can raise LDL cholesterol, increasing the risk of heart disease, Dr Brown said.

You don't need to cut saturated fats from your diet entirely, said Alice H. Lichtenstein, a professor of nutrition science and policy at Tufts University. But when choosing between healthy and unhealthy fat sources, try to opt for the healthier one.

3. WATCH OUT FOR ADDED SUGARS

While the experts focused on certain foods to eat more of, they did agree that you should limit added sugars.

Added sugars should make up less than 10% of your daily calories, or no more than 50g if you consume 2,000 calories per day, according to federal guidelines. The American Heart Association sets a stricter limit of no more than 25g of added sugars per day for women and no more than 36g per day for men.

Diets high in added sugars can increase risks of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and obesity, among other chronic conditions.

Added sugars are found in many foods, including those you may not expect, such as store-bought tomato sauces and salad dressings. So they can be hard to avoid.

But if you follow the other healthy diet strategies — namely eating more whole foods — you're likely to consume fewer of these sugars overall, the experts said. The fibre in whole fruits and vegetables, for instance, can help you stay fuller, longer, and make you less likely to reach for sugary snacks, Brown said. And whole foods, by definition, don't include added sugars.

4. TRY TO COOK MORE

According to recent government data, US consumers spend a greater share of their income on meals outside the home than on groceries for home cooking.

There's no harm in eating out occasionally, the experts said. But research suggests that people who prepare more meals at home are more likely to adhere to a healthier diet and consume fewer calories, and they are less likely to become obese or develop Type 2 diabetes.

Cooking doesn't have to be complicated or time-consuming, said Candice Schreiber, a clinical dietitian at the Ohio State University. You can prepare flavourful dishes using simple methods such as roasting or grilling. And meal prepping can save a lot of time, Schreiber said.

When you cook, Gardner recommended making fruits and vegetables the main part of your meal. Instead of a hunk of beef with a small side of vegetables, for instance, have vegetables as the main

dish with a small side of meat. Or instead of cheesecake with a couple berries on top for dessert, he added, have a bowl of berries with a dollop of cheesecake on top.

5. FIND JOY, AND FLAVOUR, IN HEALTHY EATING

Learning to love healthy food often takes patience and experimentation.

“One of my biggest pet peeves as a dietitian is when people think healthy food can’t taste good,” Schreiber said. “It absolutely can.”

To find joy in a healthy diet, Gardner said, try adding flavourful herbs and spices to your food. Jazz up nuts or vegetables with a homemade “flavour dust” made from garlic, onion and Worcestershire powders, for instance.

And search for healthier alternatives to less healthful foods that you love, Gardner said. If you have a bowl of ice cream every night, see if berries or apple slices with honey or nut butter can hit the same spot. Or if potato chips are your regular midafternoon snack, try popcorn with a little olive oil and nutritional yeast.

It can take some time to find these healthier alternatives, Gardner said. But don’t give up. It “really is feasible” to find something that you love just as much, if not more, he said.

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