Healthy Eating: A Healthy Perspective

In my work as a nutritionist, I spend a lot of time talking to people about healthy eating. Yet, I find that the definition of what healthy eating is varies greatly from person to person. Most people emphasize the foods they think they shouldn’t have, that they feel don’t belong in a healthy diet. Others seek to eat only those foods that they consider to be nutritionally superior and avoid anything with too much fat, sugar or too many calories. Both of these approaches lack perspective and don’t take into account how everything the person eats contributes toward the overall quality of their diet.

To gain perspective, one should consider the long-standing nutrition rule, known as the “80/20” rule, which states that as long as 80% of a person’s diet is in good shape, the other 20% will not negatively impact it. So, if you choose to eat lean protein, whole grains, lots of fruit and vegetables and healthy fats, the occasional french fries, brownies and candy does not turn your diet into an unhealthy one.

One common practice is to judge individual foods according to their nutritional value. While food labels provide important information, I like to say that we don’t eat numbers, we eat food. Eating “by the numbers” can result in an unnecessarily restrictive diet and tends to moralize eating according to how “good” or “bad” our choices are. It’s how our diet looks over a two-week period that tells us how nutritious it is vs how any single food choice measures up on a nutrition chart.

For those individuals who cut out certain foods because they are concerned about the adverse effects on their health, I would encourage them to consider how much and how often they have those foods vs whether or not they have them at all. We must remember that our bodies are not the finely-tuned machines we make them out to be and are actually more forgiving and flexible in the way they process food, nutrients and calories. Likewise, the demand for nutrients and calories fluctuates according to many factors, some of which are out of our control.

Healthy eating allows us to acquire all the nutrients our bodies need while still providing a sense of pleasure and satisfaction—and without the guilt!

Antioxidants: Health Defenders

Many chronic and degenerative diseases have been tied to a process known as oxidative stress, which produces unstable free radicals that can damage the body’s cells. Even the normal process of aging has been attributed to the accumulation of free radicals! These free radicals occur as a result of both normal cellular functions and also from environmental toxins.

Many foods, particularly fruits, vegetables, nuts and whole grains, contain significant amounts of antioxidants, which can counteract the effects of oxidation. The US government has compiled a database of foods high in antioxidants, which can be viewed at: www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp. Foods with the highest values appear in the column at right.

Top Foods for Antioxidant Content

- Berries
- Legumes
  Eg: Kidney Beans
- Nuts
- Dried Fruit
- Potatoes
- Apples
- Oranges

Laura O’Gara, RD, LDN is available to meet individually with students at the Health Center on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Visits are free of charge and can be arranged by calling x63677.

She can also be reached by voice mail at x63696 or by email at logara@brandeis.edu.
Healthy Exercise Habits: Mix It Up!

Just as healthy eating can be open to some interpretation, so can the concept of healthy exercise. Most of us would agree that a well-rounded exercise program should contain aerobic, strength-training and stretching components. Yet, many people stick to one basic routine and do the same exercises or take the same classes over and over again.

One problem with this approach is the effect known as conditioning, where your body becomes adapted to the exercise and you no longer reap the same benefits.

Another problem is the prospect of acquiring an overuse injury such as tendonitis, a pulled muscle or stress fracture.

For both reasons, it makes sense to vary your routine and try something new. This technique is known as cross-training. If you're a runner, try spending some time on the bike or in the pool in order to take some of the weight and pressure off of your legs and feet. If you're a heavy weight lifter, investigate functional exercises using physioballs, medicine balls and exercise bands. And everyone can benefit from exercises or classes that emphasize stretching, such as yoga. Incorporating stretching into your exercise routine helps to improve flexibility and limits the stiffness and soreness that can occur after exercise.

Symptoms of an overuse injury include pain, stiffness and sometimes swelling and redness over the course of several weeks. Clicking, snapping or a creaking sensation in the affected joint may also indicate a problem. Ignoring these symptoms and continuing to exercise can lead to a fracture or even more serious condition. Seek attention from a medical or fitness professional and take measures to rest the affected area.

There are other signs that you may be taking exercise to an unhealthy limit. Fatigue is one indicator. If, after a workout, you feel the need to lie down or take a nap later in the day, you probably pushed yourself too hard. Also, a general "rundown" feeling that lasts for a week or more is an indicator that you may need to back off some in the amount of time you spend exercising.

Shaping Up Your Weekends

Who doesn't look forward to the weekends? It's a time to kick back, catch up on some sleep and connect with friends. It can also be a time, however, where people feel they slide back into some unhealthy habits, after staying on track for most of the week.

If you read the first article, then you know it's okay to "live a little" and enjoy eating some foods that wouldn't be found on anyone's list of healthy options. But too many people end up regretting their weekend binges and feel farther from their goals once Monday rolls around. If this sounds like you, then maybe a little planning can help you enjoy your time off from work or classes without sacrificing your personal goals for staying fit and healthy.

First of all, try to get a handle on your plans for the weekend, especially when it comes to meals. Are you going to eat out or off-campus? Do your plans even take into account when and where you will eat? Often, students don't plan and then end up grabbing something at the last minute or waiting too long to eat and then going overboard once they do.

How about exercise? It may be the last thing on your mind (as opposed to sleep), but using the weekends to catch up on your exercise can help you afford those extra calories and make you feel like you're staying on track. Better yet, use exercise as a way to catch up with a friend—go for a walk or jog, or play a game of frisbee or tennis. Exercise is also a great way to dissipate some of the tension accumulated during the week and can actually help you settle into a study session back in your room or the library.

Have a GREAT weekend!

Be Fit Brandeis! Helps You Achieve Your Goals

Weekly fitness workshops began last month and are held on Wednesdays from 5-6:30 in the multipurpose room at the Gosman Athletic Center. Here's a listing of upcoming topics:

10/19 Steps to a Healthier Heart
10/26 Hunger: Who's Controlling Who?
11/2 Pump It Up!
11/9 Happy, Healthy Holidays!
11/16 Chill Out!
11/30 If Only I Could...
12/7 That's a Wrap!

For a more complete description, visit the Athletics Dept website and click on Wellness Workshops or contact Laura O'Gara at x63696.