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Nutrition: The Cornerstone of Holistic Health

By Vicky A. Newman MS, RD

Key to reducing our risk for chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes are lifestyle choices we can control. Both diet and activity are lifestyle factors that affect our internal environment or “terrain.” Actions we can take to encourage a terrain that is resistant to disease include controlling weight, maintaining good circulation, eating plenty of plant foods, and choosing healthy fats.

Control Your Weight

Diets high in processed foods make it easy to consume excessive energy, which favors fat storage; and excessive intake of simple sugars like fructose (as in high-fructose corn syrup) in the absence of fiber contributes to obesity. It is not just the number of pounds on the scale that is a concern, but perhaps more importantly the amount of stored fat compared to lean body mass (muscle) that makes up those pounds.

Physical activity increases metabolic rate, allowing us to consume more food and more disease-fighting nutrients without gaining weight. Inactivity contributes to loss of lean body mass and favors fat accumulation. Excess stored fat in turn leads to insulin resistance, which is associated with chronically higher levels of insulin and insulin-like growth factor, both associated with a terrain more conducive to chronic diseases.

Maintain Good Circulation

Good circulation is critical for good health. Our blood delivers oxygen and nutrients to our tissues, and plays a role in removing toxins, and regular physical activity supports good blood circulation. A diet rich in plant foods also helps to maintain a healthy circulatory system. Plant foods are generally lower in fat,

especially saturated fats that increase the tendency of the blood to thicken and clot. Plant foods are also rich in antioxidant and anti-inflammatory “protectors” that help to reduce cellular damage and inflammation that can lead to plaque buildup.

In addition to supporting weight control and circulation, regular moderate physical activity helps to strengthen the immune system and to reduce several key biological indicators of disease risk including sex hormone levels, insulin resistance, and inflammation. The current guidelines for moderate physical activity are 30 - 60 minutes at least five days per week. If walking is your activity of choice, aim for a minimum of 100 steps per minute (a 30-minute walk would be 3,000 steps or more). If you choose to walk on a treadmill, set the pace at three to four miles per hour, or a 15-20 minute mile.

Eat Plenty of Plant Foods

A healthy diet is one that includes plenty of plant foods (vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and beans/legumes), while limiting processed (refined) foods, and red meats. Plant foods provide fiber, along with protective nutrients and phytochemicals- biologically active compounds produced by plants



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to protect them from damage from the environment. When we eat plants, phytochemicals help to protect our body from damage that can lead to cancer and other chronic conditions.

Fiber-rich foods help us to feel full with fewer calories, which supports weight control. Fiber also lowers the glycemic load or elevation of blood sugar after a meal. Additionally, fiber enhances the excretion of carcinogens and helps normalize hormone levels, which in turn can reduce the risk of hormone-related cancers (like breast and uterine). Fiber also promotes the growth of beneficial bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract. It is recommended that we consume about 25-35 grams of fiber each day.

Choose Healthy Fats

Fatty and fried foods not only make weight control more challenging, fat can be a source of fat-soluble contaminants. The rancid fats found in aged meats, cheeses, and deli meats can contribute to oxidative damage of body tissues. To reduce ingestion of fat-soluble contaminants, it is helpful to eat smaller sized animals (like chickens) and fish (like sardines) that are lower on the food chain. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends that consumption of farmed salmon be limited to one three-ounce serving per month. It is also helpful to limit or avoid full-fat dairy products and red meats, as well as processed foods made with hydrogenated (trans) fats. The current guideline is to limit beef, lamb, and pork consumption to 18 ounces per month.

Refined oils (corn, cottonseed, safflower, sunflower, soy) and processed and fried foods made with these oils are best minimized or avoided, because these oils tend to be pro-inflammatory, and chronic low-grade inflammation contributes to the development of chronic diseases. The healthiest fats are those found in plant foods, like avocados, nuts, and seeds, because along with fat, these foods also provide nutrients and other phytochemicals. Including anti-inflammatory omega-3 fats in your diet several times each week is also

helpful. While fish and seafood provide the most biologically active forms of omega-3 fatty acids, flaxseed, hemp, and chia seeds also provide these anti-inflammatory fats.

Remember, you can use your fork to reduce your risk of chronic diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes with the following nutrition strategies: 1) avoiding excess weight gain; 2)

eating plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and beans; 3) reducing your consumption of fatty foods; 4) eating fish or seafood (not fried) two –to–three times each week; and 5) avoiding sweetened beverages and food made with high-fructose corn syrup.



Reducing Disease Risk

Maintain a healthy weight

Enjoy a physically active lifestyle:
30 - 60 minutes a day of moderate intensity activity
At least 10,000 steps each day

Eat plenty of plant foods:

Vegetables (four to five servings per day)
Fruits (two to three servings per day)
Whole grains (two to three servings per day)
Beans/legumes (three to four servings per week)

Limit fatty foods and choose healthy fats:

Minimize fried, savory snack foods and fast foods
Go easy on salad dressings and mayonnaise
Limit red meat (no more than 18 ounces per week)
Eat fish or seafood (not fried) two to three times each week
Limit farmed salmon to one serving per month

Avoid sweetened beverages and foods made with high-fructose corn syrup

Nursing Perspective on Nutrition: A Foundation for Good Health and Great Nursing

By Kathy Swasy RN, BSN

The food we take into our body has the ability to support our health in a powerful way. Never before have we had access to such an abundance of food- so many choices are available to us! With so many foods and food products accessible year round it can be challenging to know where to begin. I was inspired to learn about nutrition as a young adult. I wanted to look and feel a certain way, and I tried many diets searching for the perfect one. I read a book about a man who regained his health after a diagnosis of cancer through a diet of mostly whole grains and vegetables, and it made sense to me that eating whole foods could lead to good health. The World Health Organization states “An unhealthy diet is one of the major risk factors for a range of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and other conditions linked to obesity” (World Health Organization, 2014). I was inspired to find a health center where I took cooking classes, and began eating this way. What I learned is that there is no perfect diet for everyone. Individuals and situations vary, and what works for one person in any given place and time may not be right for another. What we eat can be adjusted according to climate, season, and personal health condition. For example, in the middle of a snowy winter, it is not typical to eat tropical fruits like pineapple or banana, which would not be found growing locally. These foods have a cooling effect on your body. For winter, a warming food like baked sweet orange squash is both delicious and more appropriate for your body. I’m reminded of pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving!

Nurses have a unique opportunity to be role models for good health because

patients look to us for guidance on how to achieve and maintain wellness. Simply sharing what has worked for you, whether it is a new recipe, favorite vegetable, cookbook, yoga class, or exercise is truly a gift; and we can empower patients to learn what they can do to improve their health. There are many resources you can tap into. One such resource is NutritionMD.org, “...a free, noncommercial Web site... [developed by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine] to provide nutrition information for doctors and patients, as well as guidance on how to begin low-fat, vegan diets” (Barnard, 2007, p. 182). This web site provides hundreds of recipes, shopping lists, and other user friendly information.

Our daily habits and thoughts create who we are and what we become, and influence the quality of care we provide. In addition to being good role models, taking care of our own health with a wholesome diet, adequate sleep, and regular exercise, we can also improve our quality of life, job satisfaction, and performance. Proper nutrition can elevate self-confidence, increase energy, enhance clarity of thinking and judgment, and strengthen immunity. As a nurse working on a busy patient care unit, I noticed my productivity, attitude, and ability to handle stress were all much improved when I ate well. This took advance planning on my part to prepare and bring food to work; otherwise I was attracted to sugar, caffeine & whatever was available in the nurse’s lounge when my blood sugar was low! We must take care of ourselves first in order to provide quality service to others. Just like the instructions we get on an airplane to put on our own oxygen mask before assisting someone



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else, optimal health for our patients starts with our own healthy habits.

Cooking for yourself is part of health creation. You get to be the artist in your own kitchen. Being hands on and involved with your food makes a difference as you put your own energy in to it. When eating a whole foods diet I have found the key to a successful meal is in chopping plenty of vegetables! You will never go wrong with a plant-rich diet. A cutting board and good vegetable knife will be your new best friends; and the time you spend preparing food will become its own type of therapeutic

activity.

Eating this way has had a positive impact on my life in many ways. The best thing I ever did was to give up trying to have a perfect diet; there is no such thing! I love eating and I eat all types of food. Food itself is not good, bad, healthy or unhealthy; but the choices we make may be good, better or best. Eating out at restaurants is fun and a change from home cooking occasionally. If we have a solid foundation of health and good nutrition, including plenty of whole grains, vegetables, good quality fat and lean protein, our bodies can likely handle other things in moderation.

If you are not familiar with cooking and eating a plant-based diet you can start slowly by trying a new grain or vegetable with your usual meal- maybe take a cooking class with a friend. The investment of time and energy in learning to prepare some basic whole foods is well worth the effort. With experience you will learn time saving tips and tricks, and cooking this way will come to feel as easy as boiling water.

Speaking of boiling water, over the years I have burned many pots of brown rice. This is okay! If you burn your rice, know that you are on the right path; you are well on your way to mastering the art of cooking whole grains.

There is an abundance of information available on food, nutrition, and specific diets; and the experts do not always agree. The following are some of the things that I have learned over the years that I believe have helped me to live a healthy life. A health supportive diet is based upon whole foods. Whenever possible choose locally grown, in season, and organic. When trying to heal, or strengthen my immune system, I avoid sugar, dairy, caffeine, and processed foods. Hydration, rejuvenating sleep, and exercise are also important. "If you are recovering from an illness, you will benefit from allowing three to four hours of not eating before bedtime... [this] enhances the body's ability to clean and repair itself during sleep" (Waxman, 2007, p. 25). Try it, you will feel the difference!

Creating health for ourselves is a lifelong learning journey. I continue to be inspired by sharing with like-minded friends, attending conferences, reading, growing food in my garden, and cooking for myself, my family, and our dog. As a member of the UC San Diego Holistic Integrative Nursing Committee I am learning from, and enjoy collaborating with, my holistic nursing and non-nursing colleagues. We are committed to serving health care professionals, patients and families, and our greater community in health supportive ways at UCSD; and it is exciting to be a part of holistic health promotion and innovation within our organization. It feels like we are on the right path!

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Quinoa Casserole

Adapted by Kathy from Eden Foods
Quinoa Corn Soup recipe
www.edenfoods.com/recipes/view.php?recipes_id=383
(serves 6, cooking time 20 minutes)

Ingredients:

- 1 tbsp. safflower oil
- 1 tbsp. minced garlic
- 2 tbsp. cumin
- 3 cups vegetable stock
- 3 cups water
- 1-2 large carrots halved lengthwise & sliced
- ½ onion chopped
- 2 cups quinoa, rinsed
- 3 cups frozen corn kernels
- ½ tsp. chili powder
- ½ - 1 tsp. sea salt to taste
- 1 - 15 oz. can pinto beans, rinsed
- ½ cup fresh chopped cilantro
- 3 tbsp. (approx.) fresh squeezed lime juice

Directions:

In a large soup pot, heat the oil. Cook the garlic & onion for 2 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the vegetable stock & water (stand back to avoid sputtering oil) & bring to a boil. Add the quinoa, carrots, corn, chili powder & salt & return to a boil. Lower the heat, cover and simmer for 10-15 minutes. Add the beans and continue to simmer until the quinoa is cooked & the beans are heated. Just before serving, stir in the cilantro & lime juice to make the flavors pop! Serve and enjoy.