

SENSIBLE EATING IS SIMPLE.

By

William Reville, University College, Cork.

It has been remarked that the average American, looking down on a plate of bacon and eggs, doesn't see bacon and eggs - he sees death. This statement may be an exaggeration, but it contains a substantial nugget of truth, and it applies to Europeans as well as to Americans, although with somewhat less emphasis. Western society has developed an unhealthy preoccupation with diet. Many people have come to believe that choosing a nutritious diet requires much skill and knowledge and that wrong choices can easily be made which will have serious consequences. Luckily, the truth is to the contrary. The rules governing healthy eating are long-established and simple to follow.

A healthy diet is composed of protein, carbohydrate, fat, vitamins and minerals, all in the right proportions and forms. Choosing a diet that will supply these nutrients in optimum proportions is very easy indeed. The choice is governed by the first and most important law of good nutrition and healthy living. This says that one should eat a diet that is consistently varied across the four major food groups. Adults are advised to eat, every day, four servings from the fruits and vegetables group, four from the bread and cereal-grains group, two from dairy products group (i.e. milk and cheese etc.), and two from the meat and beans group (i.e. meat, fish, poultry or eggs; peas, beans or nuts are alternatives). The choices from each group should be varied from day to day to avoid consumption of some foods to the exclusion of others. The term 'serving' has the ordinary everyday meaning, e.g. a serving of apples would be one medium apple, of cereal - a cupful, of milk - one glass, of peas/beans - one cupful, of vegetables - one cupful, of bread - 2/3 slices, of meat - 3 ounces, etc. Adults should also drink about 4 pints of water per day.

The second rule of good nutrition is to maintain a healthy weight. You maintain appropriate body weight by consuming only enough food to balance the amount of energy expended. People who consume more calories than they need, become overweight, and for many this increases the chances of developing diabetes and hypertension, both of which are risk factors for heart disease. If you wish to know the optimum weight for your height, sex and body type (i.e. slender or thick-set), you can look it up in any good medical encyclopaedia, in any of a variety of books on nutrition or diet, or you can ask your doctor.

The third rule is to carry out moderate amounts of aerobic exercise. This will not only maintain cardiovascular fitness but will also tend to depress the appetite. Exercise can be effected by either walking, running, swimming, or cycling. For example, a daily brisk three mile walk, done in 50 minutes, is sufficient to maintain a good level of fitness. If you are out of condition, you will have to gradually work up to this.

Much is made nowadays about the connection between dietary fat and heart disease. The evidence in favour of a positive correlation comes from epidemiological studies and laboratory evidence that large amounts of saturated fat and cholesterol in the diet can lead to elevated levels of serum cholesterol, which can accumulate in artery walls and cause clogging. However, the situation is not very straightforward. Dietary cholesterol does not always raise serum cholesterol - some people can consume large amounts of cholesterol and still maintain low serum cholesterol levels, whereas others accumulate the substance even on low-fat diets. Other factors are also associated with atherosclerosis, such as cigarette smoking, blood pressure and diabetes.

Eating a consistently varied diet in moderation will ensure that disproportionate amounts of fat are not consumed. In my opinion, the average person need be concerned little further than this about fat. It is also wise to take sensible precautions such as sparing the use of fats and oils in cooking, using small amounts of salad dressings and spreads, choose vegetable oils high in unsaturated fat, trim fat from meat, take skin off poultry, use moderate amounts of table sugar, and use table salt very sparingly. All of this advice applies to the average healthy person. If special circumstances apply, e.g. high levels of blood cholesterol, you should take specialised advice on diet from your doctor.

There are few subjects about which so much popular misinformation is promulgated than food and diet. I will give two examples: 'The poor cannot afford nutritious diets' and, some foods are "good", others are "bad". The simple truth regarding income and nutrition, it seems to me, is that if you can afford to buy food at all, you can buy food that is nutritious. Many foods in the four main groups are relatively inexpensive - beans, peas, milk, bread, eggs, some cereals, some cheeses, vegetables, some varieties of fish, rice, and fruit in season. Meat is expensive, but it should be remembered that stewing steak is just as nutritious as fillet steak. If poor people eat less nutritious fare than better-off people, the immediate causes are not economic.

A simple-minded formula has gained currency in recent years to the effect that some foods are good and other foods are bad. For example, fish and high-fibre foods are good, whereas red meat and butter are bad. It is felt that fibre is good because it can help to maintain a healthy gut and may lower blood cholesterol. On the other hand, foods rich in saturated animal fat may raise blood cholesterol and possibly lead to atherosclerosis. However, if one adheres to the first two principles of good dietary practice, adequate amounts of all essentials are assured and no individual elements are supplied in excess.

To single out individual foods as either good or bad is dangerous. It tends to make people over-emphasise some foods and possibly cut other foods out altogether, even whole food groups. The result is an unbalanced and sub-optimal diet which can, in extreme cases, lead to severe problems, e.g. the recent case of a man who was so impressed with the nutritional qualities of bran that he ate copious amounts of it at every opportunity. A ball of bran eventually obstructed his intestine and an operation had to be performed to remove it.

What about take-away hamburgers and french-fries? They tend to have a high fat and salt content and will unbalance the diet if eaten very frequently. Fast food is alright occasionally as a convenience, but it should be left at that.

Food advertisements now play on our obsession with diet, emphasising a connection between diet and health, and between diet and a beautiful body. The message is 'eat brand X and you will not get disease Y' or 'eat brand X and you will look like this beautiful model' (ignore the fact that you are genetically shaped like a pear!). The aim of advertising is to sell product, not to educate the public or to improve public health. It widely disseminates half-truths and infects the public with anxieties about foods. The real truth about good nutrition and healthy living is simple and straightforward - variety, moderation and exercise. If we adopt these habits we can stop fretting over the nutritional value of every forkful that enters our mouths. Such a development would cause the food advertisers to fret, and wouldn't that be nice for a change!

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