Targeting a Healthier Diet

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There are three qualities to good health. The first is being physically and mentally fit. A person is able to meet the demands of daily living such as doing housework without becoming exhausted, mowing the lawn or weeding the flower beds without becoming tired and climbing stairs without becoming winded. The second quality is that a person has few disease risk factors. For example, high blood pressure is a risk factor for heart disease. The third quality of good health is that a person has no obvious illness.

Several lifestyle factors are important to health. Although this fact sheet focuses primarily on eating habits and nutrition, your health may also be influenced by:

- habits such as smoking, drinking and taking medication
- life stresses and how they are managed
- practicing safety measures in and around your home
- your current level of physical activity

To be healthy, a person should eat a balanced diet consisting of a variety of nutrients. Nutrients are substances in food needed for normal growth, maintenance and repair of tissues. There are six categories of essential nutrients: water, fats, carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins and minerals.

Water

Water is important for survival. Fifty to sixty percent of body weight is water. A physically active adult living in a moderate climate should drink approximately six to ten eight-ounce glasses of water a day. Active adults and those living in warmer climates may need more water.

Fats

Although most of us don’t like our bodies to have “added fat,” we need fat for good health. Fats:

- provide energy at the rate of 9 calories per gram
- carry the fat-soluble vitamins of A, D, E and K through our bodies
- keep protein from being used as a source of energy
- increase the flavor of foods
- contribute to the feeling of being full

Fats are found in margarine, butter, oils and meats, and they are added to many snack foods. It is suggested that people over 2 years of age should get 30 percent or less of their daily calories from fats. This goal for total fat intake applies to the diet over several days, not to a single meal.

Here are some basic principles for reducing fats in the diet:

- Reduce the total amount of fat consumed, especially saturated, trans and hydrogenated fats.
- Eat less fat from animal sources. These include cholesterol-containing foods such as meats, eggs and butter.
- Use vegetable oil (except coconut, palm and palm kernel oils) instead of solid fats in cooking. Look specifically for oils high in monounsaturated fats such as olive oil, canola oil and peanut oil.
- Practice moderation by reducing the amount of salad dressings, gravies and sauces used.
Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates provide the main source of energy in the diet. They include starches, sugars and fibers. Complex carbohydrates such as vegetables, whole grains and legumes are important in the diet because they help regulate how the body uses fat for energy, and they keep protein from being used as energy. Americans should consume about 50 percent of their total daily calories from carbohydrates. Read food labels to determine the types of carbohydrates in the diet and to make sure that the foods chosen provide not only carbohydrates but other needed nutrients.

Proteins

Protein is important in building, maintaining and repairing body tissues. Complete proteins are found in most foods of animal origin. Incomplete proteins are found in foods of vegetable origin and in gelatin. By combining incomplete proteins, the quality of protein in the diet is raised. For example, use cooked dried beans with rice or bulgur, tofu with rice or split pea soup with rye bread. Be sure your daily intake is adequate, but not excessive. Too much protein is not useable and is stored as fat.

Vitamins and Minerals

Vitamins and minerals are found in most foods. They have no calories and are needed only in small amounts. Therefore they are often called “micro” nutrients. Both vitamins and minerals work with other nutrients in the body.

Vitamins regulate body processes that promote growth and maintain health and life. There are fat-soluble (vitamins A, D, E and K) and water-soluble (B-complex and vitamin C) vitamins. Eating too much of a fat-soluble vitamin could result in toxicity. Water-soluble vitamins are not stored in the body.

Minerals help keep water evenly distributed throughout the body. They also give structure to bones, teeth, blood and cartilage. Minerals are stored in the body and therefore can be harmful if consumed at high levels. The major minerals are calcium, phosphorus, sodium, potassium, chloride, magnesium and sulfur. Trace minerals are iron, iodine, zinc, copper, manganese, fluoride, chromium, selenium and molybdenum.

Most healthy people get enough of the essential vitamins and minerals through a well-balanced diet and do not need supplements. If you do take supplements, limit the dosage to 100 percent of the Daily Recommended Allowances. Vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron are listed on food labels.

Summary

Target a healthier diet by thinking and acting positively! Focus on foods that you can have, rather than on what you can’t have. A “pinch of the right” attitude puts you on the way to healthful living.

References

Center on Rural Elderly, University of Missouri System. Vol. 2, Senior Series.