



People should meet essential nutrient needs

Too often people equate good nutrition with eliminating the so-called "bad" foods and ingredients from their diets. This is a shortsighted view that can harm health.

The number one goal for good nutrition is to meet the need for essential nutrients within a person's calorie requirements. This is more difficult for someone with low calorie needs than it is for someone who is physically active and can eat more food.

Along with this basic foundation of meeting essential nutrient needs, health can further benefit by not over- or under-consuming specific types of foods and food components and by consuming a variety of foods to obtain many of the nonessential, but beneficial, constituents of foods such as phytochemicals.

Question: What is an essential nutrient?

Answer: The human body requires thousands of chemical components to carry out its functions. The body can make most of these components from other chemicals commonly found in the body.

However, about 50 of these chemicals cannot be made in the body or can't be made rapidly enough to meet the body's daily needs. Since these chemicals must be obtained from foods, they are considered to be "essential nutrients." Inadequate intake of an essential nutrient eventually impairs functions of the body that are dependent on the nutrient. This leads to related health problems.

The 50-some essential nutrients include 13 vitamins, nine amino acids from protein, two fatty acids from fats, and a growing number of minerals.

These are the essential nutrients for the average person in a normal state of health. At times,

health problems and genetic conditions can increase nutrient needs and make normally non-essential compounds essential.

Q: What are the nonessential, but beneficial, components of foods?

A: Carbohydrate and fiber are debatably essential, but it is clear that the proper amounts of these in the diet benefit health. Foods also contain non-essential phytochemicals (plant chemicals) and zoochemicals (animal chemicals) that are not essential for body functions, but often enhance health when consumed in reasonable amounts.

This year, Health Options will focus on essential nutrients and why you need to think twice before you remove specific foods from your diet.

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.

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