



Nutrition key to body's long haul

This marks the 400th piece written by columnists Joannie Dobbs and Alan Titchenal, who began offering health and nutrition advice in the Star-Bulletin in 1997. Their "Health Options" columns can be found on this page every other Saturday, but today they offer an expanded version highlighting key options for promoting optimal health.

Expecting to be healthy without considering nutrition is like driving a car and never checking the oil, coolant, brake fluid or tire pressure. You might have enough gas to make it to the North Shore, but something else is likely to leave you stranded on the side of the road.

Most of us keep our fuel tanks full of calories -- maybe too full -- but what are the other things to check in order to achieve your genetic potential for optimal health?

Five ways to promote long-term health:

» **Variety:** Eating a wide variety of foods helps ensure you'll meet all your essential nutrient needs. Eat an assortment from each and every food group. For the body to function, it must have an adequate supply of nutrients -- more than 40 specific chemicals such as vitamins, minerals, fatty acids and amino acids. Miss just one essential nutrient and eventually serious health problems can develop.

» **Moderation:** Too much or too little of any nutrient can be harmful. Good nutrition means eating "not too much, not too little, but just right." You could think about nutrition as a team sport, with nutrients as team members. When all positions are filled, the team can excel. But this analogy is not perfect because in the nutrition game, if a player (nutrient) is injured or missing, the game stops. There is no way for the halfback to fill in for the quarterback.

» **Balance:** Meeting essential nutrient needs along with calorie needs is the foundation of a healthy diet. This requires eating balanced amounts of food from all of the food groups to maintain a healthy weight. Nutrition is a science of proportions. It is not black and white or good and bad. A food is only bad if it is consumed in excess of what is good for a person.

» **Physical activity:** From a nutrition perspective, physical activity is important because more activity burns more calories, allowing you to eat more. This gives you a better chance of consuming all of those 40-plus nutrients needed. One of the challenges of aging is that calorie needs decline but nutrient needs do not. So, diet quality must change, and nutritional supplements might be the only way to meet some nutrient needs.

» **Your genetics:** Science is not at the point where an analysis of your DNA can tell you how to eat. But you can pay attention to the health problems most common in your relatives. If there are obvious genetic predispositions to specific diseases, become educated about prevention. It also helps to know ahead of time what to do if the problem develops in you.

Facts on nutrition essential

Everyone should learn some basic scientific principles related to nutrition and health. Like knowing how to balance a checkbook, no one should leave high school without this information. Lacking the rudiments of nutrition science increases a person's susceptibility to all the health hype that pervades the modern world. It becomes impossible to know what is really worth worrying about and what is not.

Five things that hinder long-term health:

» **Poor understanding of the role of nutrition:** There are many common gaps in popular nutrition knowledge. At a most basic level is the tendency to misunderstand the need for protein. Protein needs don't decline in older people and may even increase somewhat. Those following a low-calorie diet for weight loss have increased protein needs. And vegetarians actually need slightly more protein

than omnivores, because the protein in vegetable foods is not absorbed and utilized as efficiently as animal proteins.

Inadequate nutrient intake seems to be growing more common in the U.S. This is like starving in the midst of plenty. This malnutrition is mainly due to a poor understanding of the composition of foods and how the body obtains nutrients from them. People also seem unable to grasp that a low supply of an essential nutrient will eventually cause problems. This delayed response makes it difficult to associate how they eat with their health problems.

fear of foods or even fear of nutrients often drives food choices. A current nutrient example is a common fear of iron. Due to a controversial and unproven theory that iron causes chronic disease, many people avoid iron sources. What they don't realize is that a low intake of iron can clearly harm health. That's fact, not theory.

Even some health professionals who should know better often recommend the wrong foods as sources of particular nutrients.

The confusion arises because some nutrients, such as iron and calcium, are not well-absorbed from some foods. For example, spinach is a very healthy vege-

table, but not because it's high in both iron and calcium. You'll absorb very little of either mineral due to other components in spinach that block absorption. On the other hand, spinach is a good source of potassium, folic acid, vitamin A (in the form of beta-carotene), vitamin K and the phytochemical lutein, which is especially beneficial for eye health and is thought to protect against the development of age-related macular degeneration.

In addition, few people seem to know what amounts represent normal servings of food. Despite all the pyramids and food-group systems, the concept of a normal serving is completely lost in the modern food environment.

» **Good food/bad food approach:**

Many people consider foods to be either "good" or "bad." Unfortunately, this simple two-food-group system does not promote health. There are bad diets, not bad foods. Virtually any food can fit into a healthy diet when consumed in the right amounts. For example, lean red meat is a very rich source of important nutrients like B vitamins, iron and zinc. Even though too much red meat is not a good thing, totally cutting out red meat limits food choices that provide well-absorbed iron

and zinc.

» **Focus on weight rather than fitness:** Quick loss of body weight is associated with many problems. Along with some fat loss, both muscle and bone mass are lost and fat is most often regained. Very quick weight loss from bariatric surgery is generally short-lived. Although the surgery is required in some cases, long-term follow-up studies find that malnutrition is common. Although it takes more willpower, a focus on gradually getting fit may lead to a longer and happier life.

» **Lack of physical activity:** Besides building fitness, physical activity increases calorie needs. A sedentary lifestyle means calorie needs are low. That makes it more difficult to meet nutrient needs with foods alone and reduces the ability to fit high-calorie treats into the diet.

» **Allowing picky eating:** Picky eaters often miss out on many essential nutrients and other beneficial food components. Helping children get excited about exploring their world of food will benefit their health throughout their lives.

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