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## What are the basic principles of a healthy diet?

**A healthy diet is essential for optimal physical and mental health.** In general, a healthy diet is one that follows the following guidelines, which are based partially upon the *Mediterranean-style of diet and cooking*. If you are overweight, consult your primary care doctor on how best to lose weight. These guidelines are not intended to describe a weight loss diet, but some overweight people will lose a few pounds when following a healthy diet so this may be a good place to start.

- 1. Size matters.** Watch portion size. Calories on labels are not truly accurate for a variety of reasons, but you might estimate total calories periodically. An average active adult may need 2,000 calories a day. The exact number depends on a person's sex, age, physical activity, and certain biological factors that are hard to measure. If you are overweight, 1,600 calories may be a better goal. Healthy people who are very active (*i.e.*, a lot of vigorous exercise) may need more than 2,000 calories a day if they're not overweight. Of the weight loss programs, *Weight Watchers* is one of the best.
- 2. Eat generous amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables. Include legumes like peas and beans frequently in your diet.**
- 3. Choose complex carbohydrates.** Minimize simple carbohydrates like sweets, sugar-containing colas, and processed foods like white rice and white bread. Instead, when eating carbs, consider whole wheat bread, brown rice, whole wheat pasta, and the like. Favor foods containing high levels of fiber. Potatoes are okay in small amounts. (Prefer margarine to butter, and use it sparingly on your bread!)
- 4. Check labels and try to choose the right type and amount of fats.** Prefer foods containing polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats in small amounts. Avoid saturated and trans fats found in animal or dairy products (except nonfat yogurt/milk). Also avoid partially hydrogenated oils. Good oils for cooking or preparing foods are olive and canola oil. Having some fats in your diet is important for health and absorption of vitamins A, D, E, & K, and other nutrients.
- 5. Combine carbs and protein.** If you eat some protein at the same time as a carbohydrate, the absorption of the carbohydrate is slower and more even, and your body can utilize more of the energy rather than store it as fat.
- 6. Avoid red meat.** If you choose to eat meat, try to eat fish at least twice weekly (water-packed tuna, salmon, trout, mackerel and herring are healthy choices) and poultry. Vegetarianism may be even healthier but it's a good idea to supplement with omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin B12. A vegetarian diet can provide plenty of protein. Dr. Kassir can give you additional tips if you choose to be vegetarian.
- 7. Drinks matter.**
  - **Alcohol** is one of the worst culprits: lots of calories without nutritional benefit. The one exception: after checking with Dr. Kassir, red wine in moderation (*e.g.* 5 ounces per day) may have long-term health benefits.
  - **Regular sodas** contain a lot of sugar (simple carbs) and should be used rarely.
  - Be aware that **fruit juices** also contain a lot of sugar, so drink them judiciously.
  - In some people **diet sodas** stimulate hunger and cause you to eat more. If that happens to you, minimize diet sodas or eat a small amount of nuts with your soda to fight hunger. Some people say the jury is still out on the risks of diet sodas and artificial sweeteners.
- 8. The wonders of water.** Water is your body's main ingredient. Drinking enough water helps improve energy level, mental performance, short-term memory, and ability to focus. Your water needs depend on many factors, including your health, how active you are, and where you live. A simple guideline is to drink enough water to make your urine mostly dilute (light yellow or straw colored), not concentrated (dark yellow and strong smelling). Did you know drinking water helps burn calories? A study in the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* shows drinking water transiently increases your metabolism by 30%.
- 9. The right nuts can be good snacks in small portions.** Nuts contain good fats, a lot of good nutrients, and high protein. Some nuts can even lower cholesterol. Don't overdo it because they have a lot of calories, too, so a handful of nuts per day is a good limit. Almost any nut is a good choice. Give special consideration to walnuts and almonds, which are among the most nutritious. You might include lower fat nuts like pistachios and chestnuts. Peanuts—technically a legume, not a nut—are also relatively healthy. However, de-emphasize honey roasted or heavily salted nuts.
- 10. Use herbs and spices instead of salt to flavor foods.** Salt may increase blood pressure and cardiac risk, so add salt sparingly, especially if you have high blood pressure, heart disease, or a family history of heart problems.

### Other helpful hints

- ☺ **Use your food.** Follow a graded program of vigorous exercise, after clearing it first with your primary care doctor. Exercise is the other side of the healthy diet equation, because you need to burn any excess calories you consume. Regular exercise keeps your body's metabolism elevated, even when you're not exercising. If you diet but don't exercise, your body reduces its metabolism to compensate and it will be harder to lose weight. Besides weight loss, exercise also provides numerous other benefits (promotes brain and heart health, prevents diabetes, increases strength and endurance, reduces stress, depression, and anxiety).
- ☺ **The "MIND" diet** (Mediterranean-DASH Diet Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay) appears to delay the normal cognitive decline of aging by 7.5 years. To follow this diet, eat at least 3 servings of whole grains, a green leafy vegetable, and one other vegetable every day, and drink a glass of wine (red wine is best, if okay with Dr. Kassir). Also, snack most days on nuts, have beans about every other day, eat poultry and berries at least twice a week, and have fish at least once a week. Minimize butter and stick margarine (<1 tbsp./day), and don't exceed once weekly for whole fat cheese, pastries or sweets, and fried or fast food. Avoid red meat or limit to once a week. Include blueberries and strawberries in the diet, which appear to protect the brain.