

Beyond the Food Guide

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For optimum nutrition it is critical that we move beyond the recommendations of Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Living by choosing whole, non-processed foods from each food group every day.

Whole foods are rich in vitamins and minerals, dietary fibre, and healthy fats and carbohydrates—all nutrients we need for peak nutrition. Whole foods from each food group offer the functional food compounds our bodies require. Whole grains are the primary dietary source of niacin, complex carbohydrates, soluble and insoluble dietary fibre, vitamin E, chromium, and phenolic compounds.

Vegetables and fruit are rich sources of vitamins C, folacin, fibre, vitamin K, magnesium, bioflavonoids, sulfurophanes, and other phytochemical antioxidants.

Dairy products and alternates provide our bodies with essential amino acids, calcium, and vitamins D and A. Additionally, fermented dairy food products such as yogurt usually contain probiotic bacteria, which support friendly intestinal bacteria colonization for overall digestive help.

Meat and poultry are our primary sources of vitamin B12 and heme iron (the most absorbable form) while cold-water fish provides our bodies with the highly essential omega-3 fats eicosapentaenoic (EPA) and docosahexaenoic (DHA) acids. Another important food group that is often overlooked, particularly due to our society's obsession with weight loss, are healthy fats from raw nuts, seeds, extra-virgin olive oil, walnut oil, flax oil, and hemp seed oil. Many of these foods provide the essential omega-6 fatty acid called linoleic acid, as well as alpha linolenic acid, oleic acid, and many naturally occurring forms of vitamin E.

Unlike a vitamin supplement that provides only a select amount of vitamins whole foods offer a package of food factors that work in synergy to keep us healthy and ward off disease. Research consistently demonstrates that diets rich in whole foods, particularly plant foods, reduces the development of most degenerative diseases afflicting modern society. Nutrients in whole foods work together to support our body's functions to promote growth and repair of cells and tissues, to strengthen our immune system, to promote detoxification processes, to counteract free-radical attack within our bodies, and to provide our cells with the necessary energy to do work, speed metabolism, and therefore give us energy and a healthy body weight. A balanced diet of whole foods from each food group provides the body with the nourishment it needs to thrive.

Nutritional Insurance

In a perfect world, people would grow their own fresh food under optimal soil conditions, would not skip meals, and would eat enough whole foods from each food group to attain quality nutrition. Unfortunately this is not the case.

Sensible supplementation with balanced or specific supplements can fill in dietary inadequacies. For instance, vitamin B12 supplementation is essential for vegans since their diet is often inadequate in this vitamin. B complex vitamins may be necessary for individuals with anxiety disorders who may require higher levels of these nutrients for therapeutic effect. The take-home message is to supplement sensibly and be informed of proper dosages through credible sources.

Extreme Nutrition

Unfortunately there appears to be an all-or-nothing approach to nutrition in North American culture. For the last decade, fats were shunned because of their connection to obesity and heart disease, and as a result important essential fats and healthy fats, known for their heart and brain health properties, were also compromised in the diet. Food industries capitalized on the low-fat food fad, which misled people into thinking we were eating healthier by avoiding fat. Instead we started to eat too many foods loaded with unhealthy refined carbs and depleted in healthy fats. Today's high-protein, low-carb diet includes loads of protein-rich foods and cuts out healthy whole grain carbs. An extremist mentality prevails and cheats us of the full health potential of common sense nutrition.

I encourage you to opt for balanced nutrition. Long live the whole food groups.

Peak Nutrition Tip 1

A review in the January/February 2004 issue of Nutrition Today suggests that most North American adults consume an average of only one serving of whole grains per day. Epidemiological evidence has shown that consuming more

whole grain foods reduces the incidence of various cancers, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity. We require at least three servings of whole grain foods daily to attain health benefit.

Peak Nutrition Tip 2

Consuming more legumes and lentils may protect against heart disease. A 2001 study conducted at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta found that once an Asian food culture changes its emphasis on foods like nuts, soy, and lentils, it places its consumers at cardiovascular risk because the diet is lacking in the fatty acids and isoflavones they provide. Try to eat at least three meatless protein dishes each week.

Peak Nutrition Tip 3

Epidemiological and in vivo studies demonstrate that higher intake of extra-virgin olive oil (rich in monounsaturated fat) protects against cardiovascular disease. Similarly, higher intake of fish fat, rich in EPA and DHA, may reduce the incidence of cardiovascular disease and improve the management of emotional and cognitive disorders. The essential fatty acids EPA and DHA have been shown to improve cellular membrane fluidity, regulate inflammation, and improve neurotransmission.

Peak Nutrition Tip 4

Most North Americans consume only two servings per day of fresh fruits and vegetables. The World Health Organization estimates that low intake of fruits and vegetables causes about 19 percent of gastrointestinal cancer, about 31 percent of ischemic heart disease, and 11 percent of strokes. Make 10 servings of organic fresh fruits and vegetables every day your goal for optimum health.

Nutrient-Packed Food Selections

Selecting the most nutrient-dense foods from each food group will help your body thrive. Choose the following foods from each food group for high nutritional value.

Whole grains: whole rye, barley, oats, quinoa, brown rice, whole wheat, whole wheat pasta, kamut, kamut pasta, brown rice pasta, spelt.

Vegetables: Broccoli, cauliflower, kale, spinach, carrots, bok choy, onions, garlic, romaine lettuce, radicchio, green beans, red and/or green cabbage, sweet potatoes, yams, tomatoes, collard greens.

Fruit: Blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, blackberries, cranberries, cherries, kiwi fruits, oranges, grapefruits, apples, bananas, peaches, nectarines, apricots, pineapples, cantaloupes, mangoes.

Healthy fats: raw almonds, raw sunflower seeds, cashews, walnuts, flaxseeds, hemp seeds, sesame seeds, borage oil, primrose oil, cold pressed extra-virgin olive oil, grape seed oil, fish oils.

Dairy and alternatives: 1 percent or skim milk, low-fat yogurt with active bacteria, fortified soy milk, fortified oat milk, fortified rice or nut milk, tofu, low-fat cheese.

Meat and alternatives: Extra-lean beef, skinless poultry, salmon, cod, herring, sardines, kidney beans, garbanzo beans, chick peas, split peas, black beans.

Balance your diet by selecting whole foods from each of these food groups and include them in each of your three main daily meals. Between meal snacks ideally include food groups missing from your main meals. Use healthy fats in moderation.