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Tips for Healthy Eating

Taking care of your body by eating well has lots of benefits—you will have more energy, be able to focus better in school, and prevent the development of health problems like diabetes and high blood pressure. The purpose of this handout is to cover some basic nutritional concepts that you should incorporate into your daily eating.

What should I eat?

Depending on your level of physical activity and your body size, you need somewhere between 1800-2500 calories per day. These calories should include fruits and vegetables, carbohydrates (bread, cereal, pasta, and rice), protein, and dairy products. Things like fats, oils, and sweets are okay to eat sometimes, but should be a small part of your diet. One important part of your day should be eating breakfast. Even if you only have time to grab a banana and a healthy granola bar (meaning one not full of sugar or chocolate), you should make it a habit. Studies have consistently shown that people who eat breakfast gain less weight over time than those who don't. It'll also help you feel more awake and focused in the morning.

What kinds of vegetables are the best?

The key here is to find things that you like to eat. Ideally, you should be eating vegetables of different colors, since they contain different vitamins. Vegetables that are starchy, like potatoes and corn, aren't as good for you as dark green or orange vegetables, like broccoli or carrots. You should eat 2 ½ cups of vegetables and 2 cups of fruit each day.

How about carbs, aren't those bad for you?

Carbohydrates that are made from refined products, like white flour and sugar, should be eaten sparingly. The good carbs are those made with whole grains. Whole grains can be found in things like whole wheat pasta, whole grain waffles, oatmeal, whole wheat bread, brown rice, corn tortillas, and whole grain bagels. Try substituting these for the refined ("white") version. You should have at least 3 servings of whole grains a day (see below for serving sizes).

What about protein?

The best protein sources are lean meats, poultry (chicken and turkey), fish, beans, peas, lentils, nuts, and seeds. Red meat (beef) has more fat and should be eaten less frequently. Meat that has been baked, broiled, or grilled is better than that which has been fried. Most Americans get more protein than they need, so focus on eating protein from healthy sources, keeping portion sizes reasonable, and making meat a smaller part of your diet.

And dairy?

It is very important to get enough calcium, meaning at least 3 servings a day. One serving is 1 cup of milk, a slice of cheese, an 8 oz yogurt, or 1 cup of ice cream. Your bones can still get stronger until your mid-20s, but not after that. Calcium is key for this added bone strength, which will help prevent osteoporosis when you are older. Low-fat and fat-free milk or milk products should be part of your daily diet. If you don't like milk, things like yogurt and cottage cheese are good alternatives. Cheese also has lots of calcium, but is higher in fat and cholesterol. If you don't like any of these dairy products, purchase calcium-fortified foods or beverages and consider taking a calcium supplement (make sure you buy one with Vitamin D, which will help your body absorb the calcium).