



Improve Your Diet and Stop Living Life in the S.A.D. Lane

The Standard American Diet (or S.A.D.) is exactly that, sad! Sadly lacking in essential nutrients and sadly loaded with an excess of the wrong things, like fat, cholesterol, salt and sugar. How can we improve our diets and truly nourish our bodies?

Eat More Fruits and Vegetables

Why are fruits and vegetables so important? Not only are they high in vitamins and minerals, but they also contain bioflavonoids. Naturally occurring plant constituents that act as antioxidants and support the integrity of our connective tissue. And fruits and vegetables are high in fiber, so crucial in maintaining our digestive tract health.

What fruits and vegetables don't contain is just as important as what they do contain: fruits and vegetables are free of cholesterol, additives and preservatives, contain no added sugar or salt, and are low in fat, nature's perfect foods. All you have to do is look at the bright, crisp colors, the vibrant greens, yellows, oranges, reds and purples to know how good fruits and vegetables are for you.

Eat More Whole Grains

Whole grains, like oats, brown rice and barley, help us meet important nutritional goals. They are low in fat and high in fiber, and, because the germ of the grain has not been lost in the milling process, they are higher in essential fatty acids, vitamin E and B vitamins compared to processed grain products like white bread or pasta. And they're delicious! Have a bowl of hot oatmeal with fresh fruit and nuts for breakfast or make a hearty barley-vegetable stew for dinner. Your body will thank you!

Increase Your Fiber Consumption

Fiber exercises our digestive tract, toning and strengthening the muscle that surrounds our intestines just the way lifting weights tightens and tones our skeletal muscles. Low-fiber diets increase our risk for a variety of bowel problems, from constipation and hemorrhoids to diverticulosis and diverticulitis to colon cancer. Increasing fiber in the diet is good for the digestive tract, helps regulate blood sugar and may also help reduce cholesterol levels.

What are the best dietary sources of fiber? All plant foods (whole grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds) contain fiber. And all animal products (meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy products) contain zero fiber, that's right, none!

Eat Healthy Fats and Oils

Fats and oils have gotten a bad rap. Somehow the idea has been promoted that all fats are bad and

we should eat as little fat as possible. The truth is that fat is an essential part of our diet, and dietary fats are used for many important functions in the body, from energy production to cell membrane maintenance to nerve conduction. While much of the focus has been on the amount of fat we should eat, the type of fats we eat is at least as important.

High-quality fats are rare in the standard American diet. Most of the fats and oils we eat have been damaged by exposure to heat or light during processing or cooking. This damage destroys essential nutrients and creates free radicals, chemically unstable molecules that can wreak havoc in the body. For this reason, fried foods and highly processed fats like margarine and shortening are best avoided. Health concerns have been raised about margarine, as it contains trans fatty acids a configuration of fatty acids not found in nature.

And our ratio of fat consumption is skewed. Most Americans consume too many saturated fats and not enough polyunsaturated oils. How do you tell which fats are saturated and which are not? Saturated fats are solid at room temperature (think butter, lard and coconut oil). Polyunsaturated oils are liquid at room temperature (like corn oil, safflower oil and sunflower oil). In addition to polyunsaturated oils, olive oil, a monounsaturated oil, is also a heart-healthy choice and one of the best oils to use.

Reduce Your Consumption of Animal Products

While animal products (meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy products) contain many secondary nutrients, as a nation, we tend to overdo it. A diet high in animal products is a diet high in cholesterol, and is strongly linked to the number-one killer in the industrialized nations: cardiovascular disease, which includes high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes.

How do you know which foods contain a lot of cholesterol without having to read labels? All animal products contain cholesterol. All plant foods (grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables and nuts and seeds) contain zero cholesterol. It's that simple. Eating a predominantly vegetarian diet is one way to maintain your cardiovascular health.

Avoid Stimulants Like Caffeine

Most people think caffeine "gives" them energy. Nothing could be farther from the truth! Caffeine in fact robs the body of energy by withdrawing from your energy 'savings account' now, leaving you less reserves to draw upon later. The pick-me-up feeling artificial stimulants provide is inevitably followed by an energy crash.

Reduce Your Caloric Intake

About a quarter of the U.S. population is now considered to be obese, and the numbers are rising. Our children are increasingly overweight, from a steady diet of junk food and TV-watching. As a nation, we are overfed and undernourished, our diets are too high in "empty" calories and too low in essential nutrients.

Being overweight significantly increases the risk for a variety of cancers, including colon, prostate, breast, ovarian, and uterine cancer. Animal studies have shown that the only consistent way to extend the life spans of laboratory animals is to put them on a lower calorie diet. Thinner rats live longer and we suspect the same is true for humans.

Take Time To Savor Each Meal

We often make the mistake of eating hurriedly, standing at the sink wolfing something, anything, down so we can move on to the next activity in our busy lives. But digestion actually functions better when we take the time to slow down. The parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for enhancing circulation to the digestive organs and promoting the flow of digestive juices. There is only one catch we must be relaxed for our parasympathetic nervous system to predominate. So, take a deep breath and relax, there's plenty of time!