

HEALTHY EATING (REALLY!)

Healthy living begins with healthy eating, but what does that really mean?

by Dr. Kendall Guyer Ritz, MD

It's that time of year again – the holidays are long-gone and spring is in the air. We are ready to shed our winter wardrobes and the confines of the indoors as we welcome warmer weather, more sunshine, and longer days. As springtime puts an extra bounce in your step, you may find yourself inspired to shed extra pounds and embrace a healthier way of life. Healthy living begins with healthy eating, but what does that really mean?

Eating well, while a foundation of good health, remains elusive to many Americans. Even the experts disagree on some rather basic tenets of what comprises a healthy diet.

Nutrition research continues to elucidate the critical link between what we eat and our health, but it takes time for such research findings to make their way into the lives of the average American. As such, many people think following a low-fat or low-carbohydrate diet is the way to be healthy but find themselves at a loss when eating this way leaves them feeling hungry and deprived.

Eating is one of the basic human pleasures. Healthy eating can and should fulfill that role. We are way beyond cardboard and rabbit food, well past plain chicken breast and salad without dressing. Think succulent herbed parmesan and nut-encrusted mahi-mahi with a side of whole-grain brown rice pilaf and organic baby leaf lettuce with avocado, goat cheese, dried cranberries and an olive oil/balsamic vinaigrette dressing with a glass of wine and perhaps a morsel of dark chocolate. It sounds wonderful, but more importantly, it tastes wonderful while nourishing your body with the nutrients it needs to thrive.

The basics of healthy eating start with avoiding things that are damaging to our health. In today's busy 24-hour world, the demand for quick and easy food choices has led to our dependence on overly processed and chemically-laden food items. A large proportion of these types of foods in our diet wreak havoc on our metabolism while leading to an over-fed yet under-nourished state. Things to avoid or eliminate include trans fats (partially hydrogenated anything), high fructose corn syrup, artificial sweeteners, refined sugars, refined flours, and monosodium glutamate. When reading the ingredient label, which you should get in the habit of doing, if you don't recognize or can't pronounce an item or the list has 10 or more items, think twice before eating that food- chances are it is overly processed.

There are countless foods that are both healthy and delicious and that serve food's true purpose- to bring enjoyment while nourishing our bodies and promoting health, vitality, and longevity. The optimal diet consists of whole foods – that is, foods in the same form as they are found in nature. This includes whole grains, organic fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, healthy fats and oils including the omega-3 fats found in fatty fish and fish oil, nuts and seeds including nut butters, and legumes. In addition to foods, a healthy body needs to be adequately hydrated with things such as pure, filtered water, green tea, and fresh juices in moderation. Alcohol in

moderation (1 drink per day for women, 2 per day for men) has been shown to have multiple health benefits. Optimal sweeteners include raw honey and agave nectar. The emphasis should be on fresh fruits and vegetables with an overall low to moderate glycemic load, a measure of the impact a food or meal has on the speed of change in blood sugar levels in response to the given food or meal.

In addition, certain habits will promote optimal digestion of these healthy foods. Eating smaller mini-meals throughout the day, every 3-4 hours, prevents oxidative damage brought on by large meals while promoting a steady blood sugar and energy level throughout the day. Breakfast, the meal most often skipped, is the most important meal in that it helps set your metabolism for the entire day. Eating healthy protein and fat with every meal or snack promotes satiety and longer-lasting energy. Eating in a relaxed, focused atmosphere keeps us mindful of what we're doing and prevents overeating. And chewing food thoroughly helps with digestion as it engages the salivary enzymes that begin the digestive process.

It is important to keep in mind that every individual may have specific needs above and beyond the healthy foods and habits described above. As a general guideline, however, if more people would embrace this way of eating, they would be well on their way to happiness and optimal health. Really.

[Kendall Ritz, MD](#), practices functional medicine as a board-certified internist and pediatrician. She is the medical director of the [Brandywine Center for Integrative Medicine](#).