

DIETS FOR DIFFERENT AGES

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A good diet is important no matter how old you are. In this article I will suggest dietary advice suitable for people of all ages. And to help ensure that the advice on offer is of the best quality I have enlisted the help of one of Devon's best known nutritionists, Oliver Cowmeadow. Oliver is well known locally as the founder and director of the Devon School of Shiatsu although I know him better for an excellent book he wrote many years ago called Introduction to Macrobiotics. He is also the author of a number of other books on diet and shiatsu and to further reassure you as to his credentials, he is a certified Dietary counsellor with the Kushi Institute. He has recently founded the Holistic Cooking & Nutrition School to promote healthy eating in Devon.

Lets start from the beginning, with the new born. There is no doubt that if possible breast is best. A mother's milk not only contains the perfect balance of nutrients for a baby, but also helps build the baby's immune system and resistance to disease. Breast feeding also reduces the mother's chances of developing breast cancer in later life, as well as helping build a loving emotional bond with her child.

Healthy weaning foods can be a real problem, as the majority of pre-cooked baby meals contain sugar, a lot of salt, and other unhealthy additives. Starting to eat sugar at such a young age can set up an addiction that lasts a lifetime, as well as beginning the development of illness. There are now some healthier pre-cooked baby meals on the market, so check labels. Even better is to cook your own soft rice, noodles, vegetables, and beans like lentils. Fish is much easier for a baby or toddler to digest than meat, and less salt is needed than for an adult so avoid giving salty foods and snacks like crisps.

Avoiding sugar at this age, and using sweet vegetables like carrots, parsnips and broccoli plus a little fruit can greatly reduce cravings for sugar and sweets as a child grows up. Cow's milk is not a good food for toddlers, it causes many problems such as coughs and colds and allergies, and is not necessary as a source of calcium when eating a varied and nutritious diet. (In many countries of the world the people never eat dairy foods, yet don't suffer from calcium deficiencies nearly as much as people in modern industrialised countries like Britain.)

As children grow up they are going to be attracted to all kinds of sweets and snacks, so what can parents do? You may be able to limit their intake by offering good alternatives, fresh and dried fruit for sweetness, plus some of the low sugar bars and sweets now becoming available (look in your local health or whole food shop).

However you are not going to be able to stop children eating all unhealthy foods, so instead concentrate on making their daily meals as healthy as possible to strengthen their health and lessen the affects of sweets etc. For breakfast try sugar-free cereals or muesli, porridge, egg or beans on toast, or wholemeal toast with peanut butter and sugar-free jam. For other meals try all sorts of noodles and pasta, which kids usually love, and other complex carbohydrates like rice and potatoes. Plus lots of vegetable protein from beans and pulses, tofu burgers and vegetarian sausages, plus some animal protein from fish, eggs or chicken. Add a range of vegetables and some fruit for a varied and nutritious diet. It's important to realise that preteens have such high energy needs, that without enough complex carbohydrates and protein, they will turn to sugary foods as an alternative fuel supply - creating that unwanted sugar addiction.

Teenage years bring lots of study and exams. Numerous studies are now showing that a junk food diet creates nutritional deficiencies, which reduce the ability to study and do well in exams. A diet containing 50% to 60% whole grains, bread, pasta and noodles provide the B vitamins to fuel the brain and raise performance. They also strengthen the body and so reduce anxiety and stress.

Teenage metabolism is high but if habits like snacking on fatty and sugary foods aren't addressed then you can expect an adulthood of endless dieting.

But don't get obsessed with calories and quantities as it's what you eat, not how much. The occasional high calorie treat is ok, but far better to go for those foods that give you long lasting energy - the complex carbohydrates and easily prepared meals like sugar free muesli, wholewheat pasta with tomato or vegetable sauces, beans or sardines on toast, or an omelette with lettuce and cucumber salad.

Teenage blues can be helped by cutting junk and sugary foods to a minimum. Sugar leads to 'quick energy', and then a big energy dip, contributing to mood swings and depression. A good remedy is to eat foods high in minerals, especially soups seasoned with sea salt, vegetable bouillon or miso (a dark brown paste made by fermenting soya beans with sea salt, with many health benefits).

The 20s can be a very busy time, whether you are carving out a career for yourself or struggling to bring up a family. At this time an energy packed diet is needed and if you have a young family it is important to feed them along healthy lines from the start to help establish good eating patterns.

Don't rely on endless coffee and junk food snacks to keep you going under pressure. You'll get more energy and nutritional value and greater emotional stability from eating fresh or dried fruit or sunflower seeds, and drinking caffeine-free teas like Rooibosh, spring water, or sugar-free fruit juice and herbal teas.

Learn to prepare nourishing easy cook meals like baked stuffed potatoes, grilled fish, casseroles and vegetable salads. Plan ahead so you're not pressurised into eating unhealthy convenience foods. If you are eating out choose simple foods and go easy on the rich, fatty sauces and remember if you eat lavishly at lunchtime then go for a light supper - and vice versa.

It's even more important to eat for health if you are pregnant or planning a family. The better your health when you become pregnant, the easier and more trouble-free the pregnancy and birth will be. And you will be getting your baby's health off to a good start too.

In our 30s and 40s life can start catching up on us, we no longer have the energy and ability to live to excess we had in our teens and 20s, and we often have greater responsibilities to carry. Many people start putting on weight at this time, and it is tempting to try this or that diet to lose those extra pounds. However statistics show that that 9 out of 10 people who go on diets return to their original weight after finishing the diet. It is really much better to make changes to a healthier diet, and establish new eating habits that will help your health for the rest of your life. As health improves most people's weight will return to normal, and all without having to count calories and deprive yourself of food. If weight does not drop, there may be a specific imbalance in the body, and it could be helpful to see a good nutritionist.

Heart disease kills more men than any other illness, and now is the time to seriously think about taking care of this precious organ! Reduce your intake of saturated fats from meat, eggs and dairy foods, and eat more vegetable sources of protein like beans, lentils and tofu burgers, plus regular fish and occasional chicken. And this is now the time to build some regular exercise into your weekly schedule. Pick whatever sport or activity you enjoy, and enjoy using your body.

Women may be thinking of approaching menopause and the danger of osteoporosis afterwards. Eating more dairy foods to get more calcium is not the answer. The most important thing to do is to eat much less of the foods that strip calcium from the body, especially refined sugar, coffee, tea and alcohol. It doesn't matter how much calcium you eat if you are eating lots of these foods that severely deplete the body's reserves of calcium.

Next eat healthy sources of calcium every day. The foods highest in this mineral are sea vegetables. These can be bought dried and added to soups, stew and stir-fries, like dulse or arame, or sheets of nori can be wrapped around rice to make sushi. Green vegetables are also high in calcium, so a daily portion is a good idea, plus other high calcium foods like seeds and nuts and whole grains. In countries like China where very little dairy food is eaten, there is also very little osteoporosis. It is really eating an excess of the calcium depleters that is the main cause of this increasingly common problem.

Generally, by the time we reach our 40s, we have more time to concentrate on ourselves. Good eating habits at this time can mean the difference between a decline into unhealthy middle age, and a new lease of life. Foods to go for are fish, fresh fruit, vegetables and salads, and whole grains.

Keep your skin moist by supplying it with the essential fatty acids and vitamins it needs from your food. Eat sunflower and pumpkin seeds, oily fish (herring, mackerel, salmon) and red and yellow vegetables.

When you reach your 50s, this is the time when many of the degenerative illnesses associated with more advanced years begin to show. Although one has less energy and resistance to illness as one gets older, health problems are not inevitable, and the more you can look after your health with diet and lifestyle, the more you reduce your chances of suffering illness. It is time to really cut out the foods and drinks that are damaging to health - caffeine, sugar and red meat. Eat plenty of wholesome grains, beans, vegetables, sea vegetables for minerals, fish and chicken, fruit, seeds and nuts. Your appetite may be smaller now, but the quality of your food will make a big difference to your future health.

Moderate exercise really is important on a regular basis. Try to get out for a walk in the middle of the day, especially during the winter months, to boost your vitamin D from sunlight, and to help prevent Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) caused by a lack of exposure to natural light.

To keep your hair healthy and shining (if you still have it!!) add seaweed to soups or stews or take kelp tablets.

Final advice for those aged 60+.

If you are living alone or on a pension there is a temptation to skip meals and live on snacks. Although you need less protein now, you still need to keep up your energy. Eat regular meals, even if only small ones. If you make a nice soup, make enough for several meals. If you cook brown rice, have it fresh for one meal, then steam or fry it for another meal. Have some handy tins on your shelf, such as tinned mackerel, sardines or beans for a quick meal on toast.

Reduce age spots by avoiding fried foods and by eating vitamin E rich foods like avocados and wheat germ.

Encourage sound sleep by cutting out drinks containing caffeine and remember to exercise, with regular swimming or walking. Also as I've suggested many times before two popular oriental disciplines Tai Chi and Yoga are very well suited to those over 60.

