

Healthy eating , what diet should I follow

Categories : [Health talks with Dr Chireka](#)

Date : 11th May 2016

Healthy eating , what diet should I follow ?

Your one stop centre for information about health.

<http://doobeecee.co.uk>

By Dr Brighton Chireka

There is a lot of talk about diet and healthy eating. It is confusing to many of us to know the right diet options. There are so many diet options to choose from. I am going to focus my talk on healthy eating and not a particular diet. A healthy diet is all we need . It may help to prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease, [HYPERTENSION](#) , stroke and [DIABETES](#) . It may also reduce our risk of developing [CANCER](#). This article will try to explain the principles of healthy eating . I hope that after reading this article you will all feel empowered to try any particular healthy diet of your choice

Let's first look at different groups of food

Our body need energy to be able to work well and keep us alive. We obtain this energy from carbohydrates , protein and fats that we eat. We also need minerals and vitamins so that we stay healthy. We need a balanced diet and it must contain food from each of the following groups:

1-Starchy foods - bread , rice , potatoes , pasta , Sadza etc

2-Fruits and vegetables

3-Milk and dairy foods

4-Protein foods - meat , fish , eggs , nuts , beans and pulses etc

We have got a fifth food group that we should only eat a small amount of it . This group include fatty and sugary foods.

When we have taken a balanced diet of the five food groups mentioned above we must not forget to take plenty of fibre and water.

What makes up healthy eating ?

The principle of a healthy eating is more plants and less animals . This means that vegetables, fruits and starchy foods should provide the bulk of most of our meals . Milk and dairy foods and protein foods are needed but in a lesser quantities. In a healthy diet foods and drinks that are high in fat or sugars are not advised.

Let's look at carbohydrates

We get most of our energy from carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are divided into complex carbohydrates- generally include Pasta, bread , rice and potatoes , Sadza (roller meal) - and simple carbohydrates which comprises of the sweet sugary foods. We are recommended to make sure that about a third of food in our portions is from carbohydrates. These carbohydrates preferably must be higher- fibre such as Sadza from roller meal , whole grains cereals , brown rice and wholewheat bread . These higher-fibre carbohydrates release glucose more slowly into the bloodstream providing more stable and sustainable energy levels to the body.

Remember that eating foods with high sugar can contribute to us becoming overweight. Being overweight can increase our risk of developing diseases such as: heart disease , type 2 diabetes , stroke

Tips on cutting down our sugar intake

- 1- try not to add sugar to tea , coffee and breakfast cereals. I had a struggle to stop taking tea without sugar but since 1990 I have not drank tea with sugar and I enjoy the taste. Your taste for sweetness often changes with time.
- 2- try sugar free drinks . Give children milk or water as their main drink
- 3- avoid chocolates or sweets and if you do eat them then keep the quantity down. Try eating them during meals and brush your teeth soon after.
- 4-remember the so called pure juices have lots of added sugars so be on the look out .

We must eat more fruit and vegetables

Research has found that eating at least seven portions (realistically its 5 a day) of fruit and vegetables daily reduces the risk of many diseases such as stroke , heart disease and some cancers . We should eat more vegetables than fruit in our diet . Fruit and vegetables contain lots of fibre which keeps our bowels healthy. We are less likely to develop constipation or diverticular disease if we eat plenty of fruit and vegetables. We get plenty of vitamins and minerals from fruit and vegetables. They are also filling but have low calories and low fat which is ideal in keeping weight in control.

On average people who eat lots of fruit and vegetables tend to be healthier and live longer. Having a low intake of fruit and vegetables is estimated to cause about 31% of heart disease , 19% of cancers of the digestive system and 11% of stroke. Fruit and vegetables also contain chemicals called antioxidants, such as beta-carotene and vitamin C . These are thought to protect against damaging chemicals that get into our bodies.

A word of caution on fruit juices

A 150ml glass of juice is counted as only one of your five a day, even if you drink more than one glass. The best way of eating an orange is to have the fruit not the processed fruit juice. During processing most of the fibre is removed and the product has a higher sugar content which is not good for our health. You may try to dilute the juice or get the one with no added sugars. The fruit juices contain high amounts of added sugar which is not good for our health.

If you look at the 100% fruit juice below , you will see that it contains 28g of sugar in 200mls which is about 5 teaspoons of sugar in a glass of juice. This is a lot of sugar . You may want to read more on [SUGAR HERE](#)

The following are not counted as fruit and vegetables

There is a lot of healthwashing that is going on and many people get fooled into eating junky food thinking its healthy.

Fruit cake/fruit yoghurts contain little fruit and also have added sugar , fat and other ingredients which are not good for our health. We should keep these to a minimum in our diet. Fruit- flavoured soft drinks are not counted as they usually contain minimal fruit and are high in sugar . Tomato ketchup, jam and chutneys all have high salt /sugar content so are not good for our health. Potatoes , yams , cassava and plantain all contain more starch so they are not counted as fruit and vegetables but as part of carbohydrates.

We must eat plenty of fibre

We should aim to eat at least 18grams of fibre per day. In the UK the average person eats about 12g of fibre a day which is not enough)

There are two types of dietary fibre :

Soluble fibre is found in oats ,peas , beans and many fruits and vegetables . It increases the feeling of fullness and can lower blood cholesterol and glucose levels.

Insoluble fibre is mostly found in wholegrains, and also in fruit and vegetable skin. It is not digested by our body but forms bulk in gut , which helps to keep the bowels moving normally.

We get our fibre from starchy foods , fruit and vegetables. Eating a higher-fibre diet makes us feel full for longer. Remember fibre is filling but has no calories and is not digested so help us to lose weight. We need to make sure that we are drinking enough fluids when taking a high-fibre diet.

A diet with plenty of fibre:

Will help to prevent and treat constipation

Will help to prevent piles or anal fissures

May help us to lose or control our weight as mentioned above.

May reduce the risk of developing bowel cancer.

May help to lower cholesterol in blood

May reduce the risk of developing diabetes and help to control our blood sugar levels.

Tips on increasing fibre in our diet

Fibre needs fluid to work, so we must drink a lot of fluids when we eat a high-fibre diet. For adults it is advisable to drink about 8 to 10 cups (2litres) of fluids per day . The fluids may include water ,

sugar free squashes , herbal /fruit teas without sugar.

When you start to increase your fibre in diet , you may have some bloating and wind . Do not worry much as this is temporary . As your tummy becomes used to the extra fibre , the bloating or wind tends to settle over a few weeks .

You can avoid getting wind by increasing your fibre intake gradually for example introducing one new food over a 2-to 3-day period.

A good snack with high fibre in Zimbabwe is the small packs containing roasted peanuts and maize grain. See picture below .

Eat enough milk and dairy foods

Milk and other dairy foods such as cheese and yoghurt are important in our diet . They provided calcium which is needed for healthy teeth and bones. Other foods such as butter and cream are not considered as dairy foods here , as they are also high in fat .

We are recommended to have three servings a day from this food group so that we get enough calcium in our diet. One serving is:

200mls of milk

A small (150g) pot of yogurt

A 30g of serving of cheese (about the size of a matchbox)

Word of caution is that dairy foods tend to contain high fats so it is advisable to go for lower fat options . These include skimmed or semi-skimmed milk , low-fat cheese and low-fat yogurt.

Non dairy sources of calcium include leafy green vegetables , dried figs, almonds , oranges , sesame seeds , seaweed and some type of beans .

Non dairy sources of calcium must be eaten with a source of vitamin D , as the body needs this to help it absorb the calcium.

Remember the best source of calcium is sunshine.

Read more about [VITAMIN D](#)

Eat other protein foods in moderation

Other protein-containing foods include meat , fish , eggs and plant sources of protein. Plant source of protein include nuts, seeds, tofu, beans such as red kidney beans and canned beans , and pulses such as lentils and chickpeas.

We need protein for mainly growth and repair in our body . The problem is that we tend to eat more protein that we need .

When eating eggs let's try to boil or poach them instead of frying.

On fish there is some evidence that eating oily fish helps to protect against heart disease. Oily fish include herring Sardines , markerel, salmon, fresh tuna (not tinned) , killers , pilchards , trout, whitebait, anchovies and swordfish. Aim to eat at least two portions of fish per week , one of which should be oily.

Let's talk about fat now

Fat has been blamed for a long time for obesity but it's not that clear . Recent research is now suggesting that carbohydrates plays a large role in weight gain than we previously thought. Having said that it's still a good idea to eat less fat if you are trying to lose weight.

What can you do to reduce fat in your diet ?

Avoid frying food . Try to grill, bake , poach , barbecue or boil food . If you fry , use unsaturated (

mainly from vegetable oil) . Drain the oil from food before eating .

Cut off any excess fat from meat

Avoid adding unnecessary fat to food. Make sure you spread less butter or margarine on bread

Beware of hidden fat in pastries, chocolates , cakes and biscuits

Try low fat milk , cheese , yoghurts

Avoid cream

Avoid too much salt

Too much salt increases our risk of getting high blood pressure. We are recommended to take no more than 6g (a teaspoon is 5g)

Tips on on how to reduce salt intake

- Try using herbs and spices to flavour the food rather than salt. Also make sure that the spices do not have salt already.
- Those who eat sun dried fish , it may be better to sock if first to remove excess salt
- Limit the amount of salt you use on cooking . Also do not add salt to food at the table. I know fellow Zimbabweans who blindly add salt at the table without tasting the food.
- Choose foods labelled " no added salt"
- As much as possible , avoid processed foods , salt-rich sauces, takeaways , and packet soups which are often high in salt. I was a fun of soup but now I am cutting down because of the salt intake in it . A cup of soup as shown below has 1.2g which is 21% of the reference intake of an adult per day. This means that if one takes two cups of soup a day then they have already taken 42% of their recommended daily intake.

Soups have high salt and sugar content so make sure that you do not overindulge.

Do not forget portion size

I struggle a lot with portion size. I love my plate of food to be full and you wish is for it to be full of starch especially our staple food - Sadza. Read more [ABOUT SADZA](#)

I have compiled this article with an aim of helping ourselves to lose weight and live a healthy life. We may follow what I have said above and eat healthy foods but still we need to keep an eye on our portion sizes. If the portions are too large , we will still gain weight increase our risk of developing diabetes and stroke.

Tips on food portions

Deliberately try to take small portions when having a meal .

Do not feel that you have to empty your plate

You may want to try using small plates if the ones that you are using are too big and you have a habit of filling them up.

You may want to fill up your plate on fruit and vegetable and not too much starch (sadza).

When eating out , or ordering a takeaway ask for a smaller portion.

Last but not least we must think about what we are drinking

We must remember that many drinks contain added sugars including alcohol and many non-alcoholic drinks. We must choose what we drink wisely or else our health will suffer.

Water contains no sugar and can be both refreshing and healthy . Failing to drink enough fluids will result in dehydration . Dehydration causes many symptoms such as headaches , body and joint pain, heart burn. Try treating these problems with water first and if not gone then see your doctor.

So how much should you drink?

We have been told in the past that we must drink 8 cups of fluids a day . The questions left unanswered are ; how big are the cups ? can I give my child 8 cups ? To be exact one must drink according to their body weight and also level of activity . If your daily activities make you sweat a lot then you will need more fluids as compared to someone who is sitting at home in shade.

If not very active and not sweating then an adult is recommended to drink 33mls multiply by body weight per day . If you weigh 70kg then the recommended fluid intake per day is 33x70mls which is

2130mls (2.31 litres).

Tips to improve water intake

- if it is difficult to drink pure water , try adding a slice of lemon or lime
- Keep a jug of water in the fridge so that it stays cool
- If you are sweating try to increase your water intake
- If your urine is strong colour then try to increase your water intake as you may be getting dehydrated.
- Avoid pure juices and fizzy drinks as they contain lots of sugars which are not good for our health.

Those who struggle or cannot tolerate pure water

It is advisable to drink more water but we know that some of us struggle with that. The following may help to make sure that the fluid intake is better

- 1- If you can take tea then try that and drink as much as you can . At first it may make you go to the toilet a lot but as time goes on you will get used and will visit the bathroom less frequently .
- 2- decaffeinated coffee can be taken if one is struggling to take water . It is advised to take these hot drinks without sugars.
- 3- Squashes without added sugars can be taken to replace pure water
- 4- Fizzy drinks are not recommended as some of them contain 7 teaspoons of sugar per can (adults are recommended to take a max 6 teaspoons of added sugars per day)

Avoid drinking alcohol excessively

Men should not drink no more than 21 units of alcohol per week. No more than 4 units in any one day . Must have at least 2 alcohol-free days a week

Women should drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week . No more than 3 units in any one day . Must have at least 2 alcohol-free days a week

Pregnant women or women trying to conceive should not drink alcohol at all.

Read about my

I hope I have managed to add value to your life and have empowered you to eat a healthy diet. If approached by anyone selling a diet programme you can make a to this article and make sure that the diet being offered ticks all the boxes of the things that I have mentioned in this article .

This article was compiled by Dr Brighton Chireka, who is a GP and a Health Commissioner in South Kent Coast in the United Kingdom. You can contact him at: info@docbeecee.co.uk and can read more of his work on his blog at [DR CHIREKA'S BLOG](#)

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Dr Chireka has used all reasonable care in compiling the information but makes no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions. Views expressed here are personal and do not in any way, shape or form represent the views of organisations that Dr Chireka work for or is associated with.