Frequently Asked Nutrition Questions
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“I’ve watched a few documentaries recently and am considering going vegetarian or vegan. Is there anything I need to be aware of? Is it necessary to eat this way to be healthy?”

People choose to follow a vegetarian or vegan diet for a number of reasons. One can choose to not eat meat and be healthy, and alternatively one can choose to eat meat and be healthy too. The choice is ultimately up to you. One thing to be aware of is that there are some nutrients of concern in a vegetarian or vegan diet, because some nutrients our bodies need are abundantly found in meat-based choices, and when we remove those, we need to make sure we still get them from plant-based options. Those nutrients are: vitamin B12, iron, zinc, calcium, protein, and omega-3 fatty acids. While supplements do contain these items, there are also many foods which contain these nutrients such as: beans, tofu, seeds, enriched whole grains, fortified plant-based milks, cereals, nuts, yogurt, eggs, and cheese.

One thing to keep in mind is that documentaries are often one-sided and often exploit a certain topic or issue. It is important to look at the studies cited, because sometimes the way the data is portrayed is an unethical misinterpretation and can be misleading. It is always good to look at both sides of any issue and come up with your own opinion to consider how you want to apply the information you your life.

“Is there such thing as consuming too much protein?”

This is a very common question, especially among athletes and bodybuilders. Although there has been numerous studies showing that excess protein doesn’t put a strain on your kidneys (if you have healthy kidneys), consuming too much of any macronutrient offsets dietary balance and may take up too much space in your diet to get all the nutrients you need. For example, if meals consist mostly of protein, you will most likely get plenty of the amino acids you need, however you may miss out on getting big enough servings of carbohydrates (fruits, veggies, whole grains) to give you the necessary vitamins and minerals you need each day. There is also a point at which our body will only use what protein it needs and excrete the rest. So, there could be a cost benefit in reducing the amount of protein to only what your body will be able to use.

“I want to eat healthier, but I don’t want to be obsessed with calories, food, fat, etc. Is there any way to eat better without having to track/count numbers?”

Absolutely! There is no requirement for counting any sort of numbers in order to have a healthy diet. Plus, obsessing over what we eat can create an unhealthy relationship with food and lead to some disordered eating behaviors. Being healthy encompasses more than just physical health - we have to remember our mental health too! Food shouldn’t make us feel guilty, anxious, shameful, or “bad.”
We must remember that food is fuel for our body and different foods contain many of the various nutrients we need each day. If we can re-learn to trust our body, it will intuitively tell us when to eat, how much we will need, and what types of foods our body needs. Our body will also tell us we have had enough, too little, or even too much. Re-learning to get in tune with our natural hunger/fullness cues can guide us to knowing how to feed our bodies. As for what to eat, we can think of some different food groups and consider if we are getting too little, enough, or too much of them to figure out how to find balance. Maybe we hardly eat protein-rich foods, or maybe rarely eat something sweet? Listen to your body for what it's craving, and find ways to weave in a gentle balance. That may look like adding some meat to a stir fry, or perhaps sprinkling some chocolate chips into your yogurt. You know your body best!

“What else can I eat besides a salad to be healthy?”

The options really are endless… There are so many health-promoting, functional foods that can be woven into meals to make them tasty and pack a nice boost of nutrients. Aim for a meal that pairs at least 2-4 different food groups for a nice balance of nutrients.

Some examples of pairing healthy meals with 2-4 food groups from The Commons on campus are:

- Grain bowl with sweet potato, quinoa, kale, tomato, red onion, and bell pepper with oil/vinegar on top
- Grilled chicken, sautéed veggies, and brown rice
- Greek yogurt with strawberry fruit compote and granola
- Tortilla with lettuce, carrots, beans, tomatoes, and grilled chicken with a ginger dressing
- Bagel with peanut butter and banana on top
- Chicken sandwich with veggies and fruit salad
- Whole grain cereal with almond milk and fruit
- Sandwich with a side of cottage cheese with fruit compote on top
- Egg frittata with English muffin and sliced oranges

“Diabetes runs in my family. Is there anything I can do to help prevent getting it?”

It is a common belief that too much sugar is the cause of diabetes. While sugar (glucose) plays a role, having too much of one thing is not what leads to the development of diabetes. There are many factors that can contribute to the development such as: stress levels, genetics, diet, lifestyle, mental health, work, sleep, self care, etc. There has been some research to show that being physically active has had benefits on reducing risk, as well as some dietary changes:

- Choose more whole grain foods. Whole grain options provide more fiber which is helpful in managing blood sugar levels.
- Get plenty of produce. Aim to make half your plate veggies at meal times. Choosing a variety of veggies is helpful so they don't become boring. Also vary the cooking method to mix it up! Eat them raw, sautéed, steamed, or roasted for some variation in texture and flavor.
• **Have some protein with each eating occasion.** Add in some protein with meals/snacks to help manage blood sugar levels. Vary up the source of protein by choosing different animal or plant based options. This could be a mix of foods: hard boiled eggs, seeds, nuts, tofu, beans, chicken, nut butters, fish, greek yogurt, etc.

While reducing consumption of high sugar foods and beverages can help, it is not the be-all and end-all in prevention. Making realistic changes for a healthy lifestyle that one can maintain is a better focus.

“I am always rushing out the door in the morning and most of the time I skip breakfast. Do I have to eat breakfast to be healthy?”

I would love to say “yes” to this question, but the reality is no, you do not need to eat breakfast in order to be healthy. However, there are numerous studies that show the benefits of eating breakfast, especially for students:

- “Regular breakfast consumption is associated with higher intake of several vitamins and minerals, which boosts the likelihood of meeting recommendations for these nutrients.” (Rampersaud, et al., 2005)
- “Students who eat breakfast report feeling more motivated at school than students who had no breakfast.” (Mahoney, et al., 2005)
- “Adults who ate cereal daily reported significantly fewer physical symptoms, fatigue, emotional distress, anxiety, and depression compared to other groups.” (Smith, et al., 1999)
- “Studies show that eating breakfast has a beneficial effect on academic and achievement test scores, grades, and school attendance.” (Meyers, et al., 1989)

Breakfast also helps start out our metabolism and can be helpful with hunger management later in the day. It literally “breaks the fast” from overnight. Breakfast does not have to be complicated or really large to be effective. Something as simple as a granola bar and banana can be a quick grab-n-go option that can start off your metabolism and give your brain the food it needs to get your day off to a great start. Here are some other quick options for those with limited time:

- Overnight oats prepared the night before (Quick recipe: http://www.eatright.org/resource/food/planning-and-prep/cooking-tips-and-trends/overnight-oats)
- Hard boiled eggs and piece of fruit
- PB&J sandwich
- Single-serve size cereals and milk
- Yogurt with granola and/or fruit
- Whole grain bagel with peanut butter
- Apple and cheese
- Whole wheat tortilla with some lunch meat rolled up inside
“Are there any foods that can give me energy so I can focus more while I am studying?”

Food is energy, so first and foremost we need to make sure we are getting enough to power us through the day. Hydration is also important, so make sure to get plenty of water in. Foods that are fiber-rich will help provide lasting energy, as well as foods with some good fats, as both will stay in the stomach longer because of certain properties. One great breakfast that can be used as an example may be some oatmeal with blueberries and walnuts. The oatmeal and blueberries provide some fiber, while the nuts provide some healthy fats.

Snacks can also be helpful in providing lasting energy throughout the day. If there are long periods of time between meals (over 4-5 hours between meals), a snack may be helpful to keep our blood sugar levels stable. A powerful combo of some carbs + protein can make a snack satiating and help stave off hunger for a few more hours. Some easy snacks to have on hand might be trail mix, pita with hummus, yogurt with fruit, string cheese with some nuts, or cheese and crackers.

“Do I have to cook my own food to eat healthy?”

While it is easier to know what is in your food when you prepare it yourself/at home, eating out and eating healthy is definitely an option. During busy times like finals, fast food options may be the easiest for getting a quick meal in. Here are some strategies for finding healthy options while eating out:

- Look for options prepared through the following cooking methods: broiled, grilled, baked, steamed, poached
• Add veggies to a sandwich, sub or pizza
• Choose lean deli meats: ham, turkey, chicken, or roast beef
• Opt for whole wheat bagel, toast, or English muffin
• Aim for broth-based soups (chicken noodle) or vegetable based sauces (like marinara)
• Ask for toppings or spreads to be put on lightly

“I have heard different opinions about snacking. Isn’t snacking bad?”
Snacking is a great way to help manage hunger throughout the day so it doesn’t become overwhelming and contribute to eating to the point of discomfort at mealtimes. Sometimes snacks can be thought of as “snack food” - chips, candy, cookies, etc. While those can be sometimes options, we encourage getting in some nutrient dense foods too. Snacks may be comprised of 1-2 food groups and are generally used when hunger arises between meals. They should be just enough to carry you over and bridge the gap between meals, so you can still go into the next meal comfortably hungry. Portion the size of the snack based on your current hunger levels and aim for a little protein and a little carbohydrate. Here are some balanced snack pair ideas:

• Cheese and crackers
• Peanut butter and apple*
• Greek yogurt, frozen berries, and granola
• ½ Sandwich with meat and cheese, egg salad, or PBJ*
• Low-fat pudding with fresh fruit*
• Cottage cheese and canned fruit
• English muffin with peanut butter*
• Veggie sticks with ranch
• Whole-grain pita with hummus
• Banana with almond butter*
• Fruit salad with a handful of nuts
• Trail mix*

*Refrigeration may not be required

“Are carbs bad for me?”
This is one of the biggest misconceptions. No, carbs are not bad for you. Carbs, or carbohydrates, are actually our body’s preferred fuel source -- like gasoline is for a car. Our bodies run off of carbohydrates, and these are found in foods such as fruits, vegetables, grains, and dairy. We need carbohydrates for our brain, as the fuel form of carbohydrates is glucose and that’s what our brain needs to run optimally. While we need to balance these carbohydrate sources with others like fat and protein, it is important to remember that they are a necessary part of our diet and typically are packed with essential nutrients like vitamins, minerals, and fiber.

“Is dairy really necessary? I have heard mixed reviews.”
Dairy is an easy, excellent dietary form of calcium. It is naturally balanced with protein, carbohydrates, and fat and can be easily incorporated on the go in forms of milk, yogurt, and cheese. If one has difficulty digesting lactose or is vegan, there are non-dairy
alternatives one can choose to still get calcium in without the lactose or animal-based sources. These include various milks, yogurts, and cheeses made from soy, almond, coconut, rice, hemp seeds, cashews, etc. If one chooses to avoid dairy-based sources altogether, calcium can be found in plant-based sources such as dark leafy greens, or liquid forms like fortified orange juice. Either way, the choice is up to you!

“I am a little concerned I may have an eating disorder. What are some red flags that I may notice?”

Eating disorders are more common than one may think, and can happen to anyone, regardless of size, gender, or race/ethnicity. Eating disorders are a slippery slope and can get serious quite quickly. Some red flags may be: overly concerned with food/food groups/nutritional content of food items, avoiding meal times or avoiding eating in front of others, high level of concern with weight and/or shape, or high value places on certain numbers (weight, body fat %, clothing size, grams of carbs/fat/protein, etc.) If any of these red flags rang true, please take the screening tool at https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/screening-tool for more help. You can also schedule an appointment with Cassie, our Registered Dietitian, or contact CAPS for an appointment.