



Healthy Eating

Dr. Shakuntala Dawesar

Practising Family Physician & Counselor, Delhi
shakuntaladawesar@yahoo.co.in

The human body is a remarkable example of a complex combination of organs and processes which enable it to function harmoniously at different levels of the mind and body.

While every human being is similar anatomically and physiologically, to a large extent, no two are exactly alike emotionally and intellectually. This is reflected in the responses of different individuals to similar conditions, and this is what, perhaps, gives each individual a distinct and special identity.

In order to optimally carry out the functions of the body, it has specific nutritional needs which must be met. It may be pertinent to mention that the body has tremendous reserves and resilience, hence even when the nutritional needs are not met, from time to time; the body is capable of continuing to function on the reserves it builds up. However, when the nutritional demands are not satisfactorily met for prolonged periods of time, then the negative effects become apparent and impact the general feeling of wellbeing. These effects can be evaluated clinically or by simple investigative procedures.

Much research has been done on the subject of nutritional requirements of the human body. The requirements vary from person to person, depending on the life style of the individual. Those who are engaged in physically strenuous work, such as heavy manual labour, have different nutritional requirements as compared to those who lead sedentary lives. Nutritional needs also vary with the age and sex of the individual, or even in the same individual under different conditions such as fever, injury, debilitating disorders or physiological states like pregnancy.

In this article, I have tried to focus on the general nutritional needs of an average urban individual with a city lifestyle of low to moderate physical activity. Healthy eating basically means having a balanced diet with fats, carbohydrates, proteins, minerals and vitamins. Diets that completely eliminate one or other component, can, over a period of time, lead to deficiency states with interference in the optimal functioning of the body.

Since the needs of the body depend on the lifestyle of the individual, the quantity of fats, carbohydrates and proteins needs to be tailored accordingly.

How does one calculate the calorie requirement for a day? The average adult needs roughly one calorie per minute or 1500 calories per day, just to keep all the vital functions going, like, circulation of blood, breathing, digestion, the function of excretion, sweating, blinking, and many other actions of the body of which we are not consciously aware, under normal circumstances. To this one must add the calories one requires for additional activities such as number of steps walked/run daily and any other activity such as work out in the gym, yoga, playing field games, doing housework, gardening or other duties.

The calorie content of fat is roughly 9 calories per gram while that of proteins and carbohydrates is 4.5 calories per gram. An average person with a sedentary life style requires about 0.8 gm of protein per kilogram of weight and about 0.5 gm fat per kg weight. Activities like walking and housework burn only about 250 to 300 calories per hour in a person of average height and weight. These facts and figures must be kept in mind while calculating the calorie requirement for a day when planning the diet for oneself. It is better to divide the food into smaller portions and eat 3 to 4 times a day. The conventional Indian diet of including rice/chapati/millet/oats/dal/curds and some fresh vegetables and fruits daily, generally provides the fat, protein and carbohydrate required by the body. The amount of each item to be eaten should be kept in mind according to the total calorie requirement. To add value to this diet, a small amount of nuts (walnuts, almonds, groundnuts) and seeds like sunflower, melon, sesame, flax, and chia can be regularly added. Due to the preservatives being used in many readymade foods and beverages today, more people are experiencing bloating of the stomach, acidity and other bowel disturbances. Studies have also shown that this is causing a lowering of the good bacteria in the gastro intestinal tract leading to digestive disorders. To enhance the colony of good bacteria, fermented foods are strongly recommended. Yogurt is an example of fermented food. Good microbiomes can be cultured quite easily at home by fermenting common vegetable like carrots and beetroots and including these in our daily intake.

Millets are recognized to have a lower glycemic index and are therefore preferable to refined wheat, rice, sooji and maida. Hence, it is advisable to replace at least one meal daily with food grains or flour made from bajra, jawar, makki, ragi, besan, oats and quinoa. These also play a vital role in blood sugar control in those having elevated levels of blood sugar.

The timing of major meals should be organized so that the morning meal is both nutritious and substantial with oats / besan/ragi/whole wheat flour, some fruits /fruit juice and protein in the form of eggs, soya, or sprouted dal. The night meal should be taken at least one and a half to two hours before bedtime. Exercise is best done on an empty stomach or before meals.

Refined sugar should be avoided as far as possible. Beverages like tea, coffee, buttermilk, milk and fruit juices should be taken without adding any sugar. Extra salt in the diet can also cause problems in the long run. Packaged food and sweets and desserts which contain unnatural colours and preservatives to increase shelf life are harmful. Sensible food habits play a crucial role in keeping your body fit. Specific attention should also be paid to the type of cooking medium used. Hydrogenated oils solidify on cooling and are best avoided. Reused oil tends to convert into trans-fat which may increase cholesterol levels and adversely affect the Heart. Oils, such as mustard oil, sesame oil and groundnut oil have a high smoking point and are most suitable for Indian cooking. Olive oil does not have a high smoking point and is unsuitable for Indian cooking. Olive oil is good for salads and as an additive to dips and some preserves.

Fruits and vegetables contain vitamins and minerals and should be consumed in their natural form when possible. Certain substances like nicotine present in cigarettes, when used, negate the benefits of a healthy diet as they predispose an individual to heart disease and some cancers.