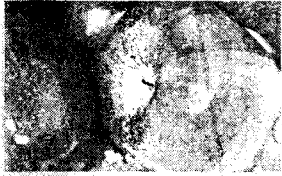


ideas for



healthy LIVING



Learn healthy eating habits during National Nutrition Month



By Kit Almy

When you hear the saying, "You are what you eat," does it conjure up a pretty picture? March is National Nutrition Month, so if you tend to be a junk-food junkie, or just want to feel better and ward off disease, now is the perfect time to become aware of a few ways you can eat more healthfully.

Nutritionists say it's always impor-

tant for people to think about their eating habits because what you eat affects so many aspects of your life. Eating well makes you feel better in general, said Susan Van Duine, R.D., a registered dietitian with Bronson Methodist Hospital and the West Michigan Cancer Center.

For example, if you keep a manageable weight, you're more able to do the things you want to. Food

is "fuel for your system, like gas is fuel for your car," explained Joyce Ross, R.D.s, an outpatient dietitian for the Borgess Health Alliance. "Besides keeping your body running, it has a lot to do with health," she added, citing the role of diet in the prevention and treatment of diseases.

Although there is an enormous amount of advice on nutrition available, the basics of eating well can be reduced to a few essentials. "Try to maintain a reasonable weight for your height because that prevents diseases like cardiovascular disease and diabetes," said Van Duine. "Get rid of saturated fats that you can replace with other fats, eliminate sweets that don't provide other nutrients, and eat more whole grains. Just trying to eat three meals a day and drink enough water—those are huge things."

Ross said that one healthy habit can be easily remembered by looking at your hand. "Your five fingers are a reminder that you need to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day," she said, adding that the most recent research actually indicates that eight to 10 servings per day would be ideal.

The importance of eating vegetables is one of the hottest topics in nutrition research today. According to Ross, new findings

on a concept called "food synergy" indicate that substances called phytochemicals which appear in different fruits and vegetables interact in the human body to make it less prone to disease.

For example, lycopene, which occurs in tomato products, helps prevent prostate cancer, she said. Because different colors of fruits and vegetables have different chemicals, it's important to "eat the rainbow," said Ross. "It's how these 400 to 500 nutrients interact, the different types and colors of food working in your system" that produce the beneficial effects.

The complex interactions aren't completely understood, so these effects can't be replicated with dietary supplements. When you're trying to improve your eating habits, take proportion into account. "I tell people working on blood sugar control or weight control to visualize a paper plate with a line drawn down the middle. If half of the plate is [filled with] non-starchy vegetables, they'll meet their goal," she said. For the rest of the plate, one-quarter should be proteins, like lean red meat, fish, chicken, cheese, and eggs, and one-quarter should be starches and sweets.

Eating for health should be a lifelong endeavor, with nutritional needs varying for different age

groups. "For children the focus is that they're eating enough of the right things and not too much of the wrong things," so that they develop healthy habits early in life, said Van Duine.

At various other stages of life, specific nutrients become more important. One nutrient that is especially needed throughout life is calcium. Adolescents, often eating on the run, need to be sure to get enough of it, because their bone growth is almost as great as that in the period from birth to the first year, said Ross.

Although adults, especially women, need more calcium as they age for osteoporosis prevention, getting enough calcium in your youth is essential to having healthy bones later in life. "If kids—especially girls—build their bones so they're dense through young adulthood, by the time they're 30, it's like putting money in the bank. When you're older, you can afford to lose more bone density before you break a bone."

Weight management is important throughout life, but especially in middle age and beyond, as the body's metabolism begins to slow down. However, Ross cautions that talk of the importance of a low fat diet gets misconstrued by certain people. "Weight is not the only indicator of health," she said.

It's important to have adequate body fat to protect the bones, as well as adequate calories and nutrients to keep the body going.

Van Duine stressed that when people seek nutritional information from various sources, including the Internet, the media, and popular diets, it's important to evaluate the information and the source. "People hear that eating vegetables doesn't prevent breast cancer and they say, 'Well I'm not going to eat vegetables then.' You need to evaluate what's healthy and effective," stresses Van Duine.

Good sources of information are registered dietitians, hospitals, and community agencies like Women, Infants and Children (WIC). "The Internet can be a good thing, too," she added, but stressed, "Look for sites by government agencies, volunteer organizations, and professional organizations, like the American Dietetic Association. All of those have reputable information."

Nutritionists recognize that all the good advice can be overwhelming and that no one is likely to follow an ideal diet. "It doesn't have to be the ideal," Ross said. It comes down to—"What little bit can you change to make a difference?" she said.