

HEALTH INFORMATION – WHAT TO BELIEVE

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Daily, we are bombarded with so much information about our health, nutrition, exercise, and the aging process that we really have difficulty taking it all in. What's more, much of the information is contradictory. In the last week in the newspaper there has been an article which clearly links excessive body weight to increased diseases and decreased longevity. There has also been comment on the effect of obesity on chronic diseases such as arthritis and disability from heart disease. Another study that I read yesterday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* noted that excessive low body fat and excessive high body fat had higher mortality rates, but for different reasons. However, they stated that increased weight itself was not a health risk as long as a person was not truly obese. The real truth about this probably lies somewhere in between. In order to put on more body fat, you generally have to eat more "empty" calories, which really do not nurture your body to the extent that foods with high antioxidant levels do. Therefore, your organ systems and general health suffer to some extent as a result of this. Eating more nutrient foods and less empty calories will put you in the lower body fat range, which has been shown by many studies to be the best for you.

Let's look at the information available on milk drinking. We know that milk has a lot of food elements, including protein, fat, and milk sugar or lactose. We also know from some studies that increased milk drinking is associated in part with high incidence of heart disease. However, if this is the only nutrient food that someone takes in, it's better than drinking a sweet cola drink. Certainly, children need the elements in milk to grow and thrive during their childhood years, so milk is very good for them.

Another ongoing discussion is about the value of soy as a healthy food. We know that soy contains isoflavones and phytoestrogen compounds, which are said to be healthy and may help prevent breast cancer in women. Soy intake is high in oriental cultures, but most of them eat a different kind of soy than we do here in the US. Fermented soy products are frequently eaten in Southeast Asia in the form of miso, tempeh, and natto. The fermented soy is much easier to digest and the nutrients of the soy protein are most easily extracted in the intestinal tract in this form. In its "raw" form such as tofu, soy protein nibs, or soy drinks, it has a certain effect on reducing the absorption of nutrients and even leaching some vitamins and minerals out of the GI tract during the digestion process. Therefore, you can say that soy is healthy, has no effect, or is anti-nutrient depending on how it is eaten.

There has been a lot of discussion about alcohol. We know that red wine has nutrients which whiskey, white wine, and beer don't have. We also know that men are able to drink a little more alcohol than women because they don't seem to have the folic acid depletion problem that is seen with alcohol ingestion in women. If a woman drinks two drinks of wine a day, it may increase her risk for cancer while decreasing her risk for

heart trouble. A man can drink two glasses of wine a day and not increase cancer risk while decreasing heart risk. The idea of moderation in alcohol intake is a good concept and should be followed by us.

An area that is often controversial and about which there have been many arguments is the vegetarian way of eating. This can be strict, such as vegans (who eat no animal protein) or can be partial, such as in the case of ovo-lacto vegetarians (who eat eggs and dairy products). There is no question that eating a higher quantity of vegetables and a lower quantity of protein is healthier. However, if a vegan doesn't eat any red meat then they really have no source of vitamin B12 and will need to supplement this by injection or sublingual tablets. Also, if a vegetarian does not know how to combine foods to get complete proteins, they suffer from low protein intake over the long run and have unhealthy skin, muscles, hair, and nails. The bottom line in this is that if you are going to be a vegetarian, make sure you get the best information about how to eat.

Another area of controversy is in low fat foods. We know that low hydrogenated and trans fat is the best pathway because these elements are actually harmful to your health. However, the body needs fat, up to about 30% of daily calories, for good health. Low fat foods have to be made of something, and it's usually carbohydrates and usually wheat-based. Most manufacturers do not take up the extra "space" in the product with protein because it is much more expensive than carbohydrates and would create a higher food cost. Carbohydrates eaten without fat or protein raise the blood insulin level and therefore increase the potential for weight gain. A combination of these three food elements every meal or snack reduces the potential for weight gain. Low fat foods therefore are healthy to some extent if you consider the fats that you are eating.

As is so often in our lives and particularly in our modern culture, we have to sort out the information and try to separate the good from the bad. Usually common sense tells us a lot about what we should do. For example, we know we shouldn't eat too much sugar, drink too much alcohol, or eat too many processed foods and beverages. We should have an approach to our lives which gives balance and which includes some of everything that's healthy and eliminates most of everything that's bad. This is the way to increase your life span and decrease health risks. Keep your eyes open; ask the experts (either online or in person) when there is a real controversy in your thinking about what foods to eat or what lifestyle changes to make.