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National Nutrition Month

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March is National Nutrition Month - the perfect time to get a better handle on your eating habits and improve your overall health.

The average North American diet consists of a large meat serving, a small serving of vegetables and some form of potatoes or rice. For most people this type of diet provides too many calories and too few nutrients to prevent chronic illness or to help maintain a healthy weight.

We have learnt a plant-based diet helps fight obesity and chronic illnesses such as heart disease, adult-onset diabetes and cancer. According to the American Institute of Cancer Research (AICR) eating a predominately plant based diet consisting of more vegetables and fruit, exercising regularly and maintaining a healthy weight could cut cancer rates by 30 to 40 percent. Vegetables and fruits contain vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals (unique plant substances) that help the body fight cancer. The AICR advises to fill our plates with two-thirds (or more) vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans and one-third (or less) fish, poultry or lean red meat.

To make this transition a little easier here are some nutritional tips:

Think Colour - The easiest way to get loads of nutrients and disease-fighting antioxidants into your diet is to fill your plate with a variety of different coloured foods - especially dark green, red and orange vegetables and fruits.

Try Some Variety - Nutritious foods needn't be boring. Instead of an apple a day, try mangos, papayas, passion fruit. Experiment with kale, or swiss chard. Try couscous or quinoa (the "supergrain" - a high quality complete protein) instead of rice. Have a vegetarian entree, meatless or tofu chili, bean soup or lentil curry. Beans and lentils are high in protein and fiber which helps lower cholesterol, speed up digestion, as well as increase the feeling of fullness to help control your appetite.

Power-Pack Your Snacks - Try your favorite trail mix with more fruit than nuts and combine with low fat yogurt. It provides protein, iron, fiber and calcium in one.

Don't Forget To Rehydrate - Remember to drink water with your meals. Water acts as a lubricant and helps digest food. Many foods, especially fruits and vegetables can contribute to fluid intake.

Read Labels - For fat, sugar, sodium and fiber content. Judge food by fiber content not colour i.e. white navy beans, white whole grain, oatmeal, white barley and white artichoke hearts are all high in fiber. Food producers are now adding fiber to a lot of products. The less processed the ingredients the more nutritious the product.

Make The Switch - Wean yourself from high fat dairy products. Choose skim and 1% milk, soy milk and yogurt, low fat cheese (less than 20% milk fat) and low fat sour cream. (an 8 oz. glass of whole milk has 7.6 grams of fat, 2% milk over 4 grams, 1% has 2.4 grams and skim .4 of a gram).

Lighten Up On The Spreads And Sauces - Instead of mayonnaise on sandwiches try dijon or honey mustard. Season your dishes with herbs or spice instead of butter and gravy. Try herb pesto, yogurt-mint, orange or spicy Mexican sauces. Use balsamic or raspberry vinegar instead of oil. One tablespoon of oil contains 120 calories; one tablespoon of vinegar has fewer than 5.

Eat Breakfast - After 12 to 14 hours without food, blood sugar is low - your body and brain need refueling to start the day. Eat something - anything to start with until you get used to the experience.

Eat More Fish - It is low in fat and even the fatty varieties, such as salmon are good sources of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

Go Easy On The Alcohol - Two glasses of beer or wine a day equals 1,400 calories per week and 75,000 a year. Enough to add 20 pounds of excess weight.

Portion Control - Knowing serving size can help avoid overeating. According to the Canada Food Guide we should be eating 5-12 servings of grain products, 5-10 servings of vegetables and fruits, 2-4 servings of dairy products and 2-4 servings of meat, fish, poultry and alternatives. However, one serving of pasta, rice or hot cereal is only 1/2 cup (1/2 a baseball or a rounded handful). A large "supersized" bagel can be 4 to 5 servings! Activity level and gender will dictate the number of servings you should enjoy. For example, an inactive, small framed female should be eating the lowest number of servings in the ranges given. An active, medium frame female or a medium to large inactive male should be eating the middle number of servings suggested. Large, active males might need to eat the highest number of servings suggested.

Enjoy eating food and have a healthy relationship with it. Food is fuel and not something to fear or resist. Evaluate the latest fad and put it into perspective. There are no quick fixes in nutrition if you are pursuing long term health.

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