Nutrition and Recovery from Eating Disorders

HOW IMPORTANT IS GOOD NUTRITION TO HEALTH?

Two main goals exist in the recovery from an eating disorder: restoring physical and psychological health and preventing relapse. Good health is a balance between social, spiritual, mental and physical wellbeing. Mental and emotional health depend upon good physical health; therefore restoring physical health is a prerequisite for recovery.

Nutrition, along with rest and exercise, is a basic foundation of physical health. If food intake and nutrition is inadequate sleep patterns are disturbed, the capacity to do physical exercise is impaired, mental concentration and decision-making suffers and irritability, depression, social withdrawal and preoccupation with food occur.

GOOD NUTRITION GUIDELINES

Major health organisations agree that there are six main principles and recommendations for good nutrition:

- Eat a variety of foods from each of the four major food groups each day
- Maintain a healthy weight (generally, a BMI between 20 and 30 is considered healthy)
- Keep consumption of dietary fat at approximately one third of your total energy intake
- Eat plenty of whole grain products, fruits and vegetables
- Use salt and sugar in moderation
- If drinking alcohol, do so in moderation

In practical terms these recommendations translate to;

- Eating **at least** six servings of whole grain products (cereals, bread, rice, pasta) per day
- Eating **at least** five servings of fruit and vegetables a day
- Eating **at least** two servings of milk or milk products every day
- Eating **at least** two servings of protein-rich foods (lean meat, fish, protein, nuts or legumes) a day
- Not adding additional salt to food

EATING REGULAR MEALS

Routine meals and snacks are important in re-establishing a normal appetite as the body learns to identify fullness and hunger signals. Three meals and three snacks per day are recommended. Eating regular meals also stimulates the muscles of the gut (digestive system) to work well. Bowel movements become regular and constipation is prevented. For some individuals recovering from an eating disorder, it may be easier to begin working towards a more normal food intake by eating six smaller meals, rather than three bigger meals. It is very important to eat breakfast since it can help prevent the desire to binge or overeat later in the day. Breakfast is the meal which break(s) the fast of the night's sleep. It stimulates the body's metabolic rate and gets you going in the morning.

Good nutrition = variety + regular meal times + enough

ENERGY NEEDS

The body needs a continuous supply of energy in order to survive. Food and drink provide us with energy in the form of carbohydrates, proteins and fats; Vitamins and minerals do not supply energy. However some are needed to help the body utilise energy from food. The energy in food is measured in calories or kilojoules. The amount of energy that each woman needs is affected by a wide range of factors. However, we know that it is difficult to meet your required intake of nutrients your energy intake is less than 1200 kcal (5040 kJ) per day. Most women need approximately 2000 kcal (8400 kJ) daily.

Our body uses the energy from food as follows

Basal Metabolic Rate. This is the speed at which the muscles in the body, including the heart, lungs and other vital organs, such as liver and kidneys, brain use up energy. The more muscle a person has the higher their metabolic rate, and therefore the greater their need for food. Since our heart works 24 hours per day, we will burn up energy 24 hours per day. Our muscles, even at rest also burn up energy as they are constantly working to keep us warm. Muscles can be compared to heaters. The more muscles, the warmer you will feel.

Thermogenic Effect of Food. When we eat food we stimulate the digestive system to process the food. This demands energy from the body. Therefore, eating causes, the body to burn up more energy and this makes us feel warm.

Thermogenic Effect of Exercise. During exercise our muscles use up energy, and produce heat.

Adaptive Processes. If we eat more than what our body needs we may increase body heat production beyond normal levels in order to compensate for the extra ingested calories. This mechanism may be an adaptive process to stabilise body weight within its genetically determined "comfort zone".

CARBOHYDRATE

Two main types of carbohydrates exist in food. The complex carbohydrates include starch and fibre-containing foods such as breads, pasta, potatoes, kumara, corn, legumes, rice and cereals. Foods containing simple carbohydrates include fruits, honey, sugar and sugar-containing foods (desserts, cakes etc). The major function of carbohydrates is to provide a steady supply of energy to all cells in the body. Complex carbohydrates are also crucial for the healthy functioning of the digestive tract and contribute to feeling full after a meal. Ideally approximately 50 to 55% of an individual's total energy intake will come from carbohydrates. Included in this will be 25-30 grams of fibre per day. This can be met by eating at least six servings of food from the bread and cereal group, plus five servings or more from the fruit and vegetable group each day.

PROTEIN

Foods supplying high quality protein include meats, eggs, dairy products and seafood. Proteins of a lesser quality and concentration are found in nuts, legumes, grains and other vegetables. The major function of protein is to build and repair the body and to maintain an effective immune system so that you can fight off infections and stay healthy. Ideally, about 12 to 20% of total energy intake will be derived from protein. This can be met by eating at least two servings of food from the milk, milk products group, plus one or more servings from the meat, fish, chicken, dried beans, nuts or eggs group daily.

FAT

The most common sources of fat are butter, margarine, oil, fatty meats, high fat dairy products and rich desserts and cakes. Fat is an essential part of meals.

Fat in food contains important fat soluble vitamins, such as A, D, E & K.
Vitamin A is needed for vision in dim light. It is also put in skincare products as it keeps skin strong and elastic, and helps resist infection.
Vitamin D is essential for strong bones. It protects the skeleton from fractures.
Vitamin E is protective against aging. It has also been proven to reduce the risk of cancer.
Vitamin K is needed for blood clotting.

Fat also contains essential fatty acids. Essential fatty acids are the building blocks of many hormones and of the substances in the body that help fight infection. All body cell membranes contain fat to give them elasticity. Women store more fat in their bodies than men. Body fat gives us the curves which make us female. A healthy body fat percentage is approximately 25% for women. This fat insulates the body and prevents excessive loss of body heat. It also cushions our bones and decreases the risk of bone fractures. Current New Zealand recommendations are for people to cut down on fat intake. This does not mean "cut out". A target of 30 - 33% of total energy in food coming from fat has been set. This means having a moderate amount of fat with each meal.