

# The York University Staff Association Health & Wellness News & Views

It is time for women to become empowered. It's your time to make yourselves your number one priority, to take the best care of your health. I get it ladies, it's much easier said than done. Your health doesn't have to just happen to you, there are many ways you can change your future health by making choices that reduce your health risks today. March 8th is "International Women's Day" so what better time to focus on women's health. Sorry guys... but this one's for the GIRLS!

All women know they should eat better and exercise more to improve health, maintain a healthy weight and gain strength, but the diets that forbid occasional treats like red wine or chocolate, and that promote only drinking your calories or insist that you follow strict food combinations are extremely daunting. Those of you who've talked to me about diet know that I am not a believer in any diet. My advice is, first to realize that you can achieve what you always thought was impossible, and second is to commit to a lifestyle that is going to make you happy and healthy. There are many different women's diets, all myths, promising the "beautiful body" with little effort. These diets/myths need exposing. Diets never have and never will work.

Every woman should know what foods are good to eat, why they are good for your body, what vitamins and minerals women need, how to prevent ill-health, and how to restore balance in your life. Healthy eating is the most important ingredient in a healthy lifestyle. It is also very significant in changing the appearance of your body. You can lift hard and do cardio, but you will never see the results that you desire without cleaning up your eating habits. Eating a healthy diet doesn't have to be dreadful or boring either. Educating yourself about the proper foods to eat leaves a long list of delicious choices. Carbohydrates, proteins, and fats are essential to any good eating program. Try surviving without one of them and you are guaranteed to be a miserable person.

Protein is probably the most powerful and effective food for woman to eat. High protein foods feed muscles. If you do exercise along with eating a high protein diet, your body "thinks" that the muscles are important to sustain life and you burn only fat. Studies have shown that women need 1.2 grams of protein per pound of body weight or 2.5 grams per kilo. For example a 130 pound woman can eat  $130 \times 1.2 = 156$  grams of protein per day. High protein foods include meat (lean meat like veal or chicken), Fish, milk/cheese products, and eggs.

Many women crave carbohydrates. If you find that you crave carbs a lot, you should know that it is not because you lack discipline or do not have enough willpower, but rather it is your body telling you that something is missing. Most women will crave carbs from time to time for various reasons. A lack of nutrition causes a hormone imbalance, which can cause you to crave carbs. Studies have shown that when a wide variety of nutrients are consumed the cravings seem to vanish. Another cause of carb craving in women is low blood sugar. These cravings hit at the same time each day, usually in the late afternoon or evening.

They also may also occur when you are dieting and depriving your body of essential nutrients or after a skipped meals. You can avoid these cravings by not skipping meals, and by munching throughout the day on healthy snacks. Lack of carbs can cause low levels of serotonin. Serotonin is a hormone that makes you feel good and gives you energy. When serotonin levels are low, your body sends a signal to the brain letting it know that it is hungry. As soon as you eat your serotonin levels are restored along with your energy. Any type of stress, anger, depression, or just being bored may also be the result of low serotonin levels, and may cause you to crave carbs. Your body is feeling down and somehow believes that food will lift you up. This usually works and that is why you immediately resort to food at the first sign of stress. Menstrual cycles may also play a role. For some reason women need more calories in the days leading up to their menstrual cycle. Medical science has not figured out why this is, but it could very well be the body's way of building up the serotonin levels to help fight the negative mood swings that are associated with PMS.

Ladies, we've all heard that carbohydrates are the enemy, it is important to remember that there actually are two types of carbs, otherwise known as good carbs and bad carbs. While the bad ones can be safely cut out of your diet it is important to eat the good ones. Examples of good carbs are whole grain foods, legumes and vegetables. These are not readily absorbed into the body as they are broken down slowly. Examples of bad carbs are white bread, pasta, rice, anything made with white flour. Yaya I know, all the good stuff. It is important to remember that cutting down on bad carbs does not mean you will never be able to enjoy that special treat again. "Everything in moderation". Moderation may sound ordinary and boring, but it's a great way to lose weight, eat better, and still have some fun along the way.

Whether your dining style is "grab 'n' go" or "sit and chill," it pays to pay attention to what you eat. Women's nutritional needs change throughout life, and it's not always easy to get all the nutrients you need by eating food alone. Here are a few important vitamins and minerals that you should include in your daily meal planning.

**Calcium** is by far the most profound mineral in the body, deficiency can lead to a variety of health conditions. In women it is believed to contribute to the irritability of muscles and nerves, cramps, osteoporosis, and insomnia just to name a few. Osteoporosis is particularly common in post-menopausal women. This means that it is especially important for women's bones to be in good condition and for calcium balance to be favourable well before menopause. Good sources: milk, yogurt, cheese, kale, broccoli, canned salmon, and calcium-fortified cereals, soy beverages, and fruit juices (check the label).

**Magnesium** helps with the absorption of calcium in our bodies. It also helps with production of energy, as well as protein synthesis and muscular contraction and mood regulation. A deficiency of magnesium can cause muscle cramping and chronic fatigue as well

as insomnia. (go figure) In fact, some studies have shown that magnesium can help relieve many premenstrual symptoms. Older women may need more magnesium than others as they have naturally lower levels. Good sources: spinach and other leafy greens, whole grains, beans, and nuts.

**Potassium** is believed to be integral in women's health. Potassium lowers blood pressure. It is also important for maintaining normal heart rhythms, nerve impulses, and muscular contractions. Finally potassium can help regulate your body's water balance which is very important for women as we all tend to deal with bloating from time to time. Good sources: (besides bananas of course) potatoes, tomato sauce, watermelon & beets.

**Zinc** is an important mineral that is found in every cell in our body. It plays an integral role in immune system functioning. Zinc is also necessary for proper sexual function, the healing of wounds, and the sensory functions taste and smell. Lack of zinc can cause hair loss, especially in women. Women require 8 milligrams of zinc each day, 11 milligrams if they are pregnant and 12 milligrams of zinc daily is recommended if they are breastfeeding. Getting a daily dose of zinc may also help prevent osteoporosis in women, especially those who have gone through menopause. Good sources: meat, seeds, nuts, wheat germ and mushrooms.

**Iron** is a mineral that works with other substances to create hemoglobin, the compound that carries oxygen in the blood. Iron deficiency is the most common nutrient deficiency in women. Insufficient iron can lead to anemia. Common symptoms of anemia include tiredness and breathlessness. Women and men metabolize iron from food at roughly the same rate. However, while men need around 8 mg of iron in their daily diet, women need up to 18 mg (or 27 mg if pregnant). Women need more iron than men to make up for the amount of iron they lose in their menstrual period. Around 1 mg of iron is lost for every day of bleeding. Good sources: liver, beef, turkey, chicken, tuna, beans, tofu, spinach, raisins.

**Vitamin D** the vitamin du jour, D could be something of a wonder drug. Docs believe it can reduce your risk of breast cancer by as much as 50 percent, and it may offer protection from both ovarian cancer and diabetes. More happiness? D helps calcium absorption and plays a central role in muscle function. Your body produces vitamin D naturally when it is directly exposed to sunlight. A little can go a long way. All you need is 10 minutes a day of midday, pre-sunscreen sun exposure, especially if you have fair skin. Besides getting vitamin D through sunlight, you can also get it through certain foods and supplements to ensure adequate levels of the vitamin in your blood. Good sources: salmon, tuna, eggs, milk, mushrooms, and vitamin D-fortified cereal, yogurt, and orange juice (check the label).

Taking a supplement and/or vitamin is a personal choice and has long since been studied. To this date you can find as much research suggesting the importance of taking vitamins as you can suggesting they are a complete farce. That said, we now have a much better understanding of how well whole foods deliver their nutritional benefits. A typical multi contains 10 to 25 isolated

nutrients, but fruits and vegetables have hundreds of active compounds with a long list of health properties. So maybe the answer is? When you're not eating the healthiest diet a multi vitamin might help fill in the gaps? So how do you know what's right for you? The best way is to talk to your doctor before taking dietary supplements.

Most women juggle child-rearing, household duties and paid work, and don't find time for themselves. Try to exercise whenever you have the chance. Three 10-minute bouts of physical activity over the day have the same health benefits as a continuous 30-minute session. Exercise DVDs or a 20 minute youtube video are a good way to slot some physical activity into a busy day. Also building in activity with your children, such as walking to the shops or playing in the park is a great way to stay active.

**Weight training** The biggest misconception that women have is that they will become big and bulky if they do any sort of weight exercises. WRONG! The complete opposite is true. In order to get rid of body fat and attain a sculpted body you need to challenge it through a constantly changing weight training routine. If you are carrying a significant amount of bodyfat, you may actually slightly increase in size for a short period of time. This is common and that scares many females away from the weight room, knowing ahead of time that this could happen and pushing through this brief period will be the best thing that you do. Once the body realizes that you are going to continually challenge your body, it will adapt and become leaner, firmer and most importantly STRONGER.

**Cardio** is probably the most popular exercise for women. The benefits of a solid cardio workout are endless, you maintain excellent cardiovascular health, it helps you to manage stress and maintain a healthy weight, it reduces the risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes. etc. The most important thing to remember about cardio is to mix it up. Do aerobics one day, zumba another, go for a run the next day and get on your bike and go for a ride the day after that. Not only does the change of routine keep you interested and engaged, but your body also gets a better workout because it can't adjust to the same, habitual exercise.

Bottom line ladies TODAY can be the beginning of a better life of improved health and fitness for you. Set a goal to make your wellness a top priority. Remember, somebody loves you. Stay healthy and fit. Your body will love you for it!

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