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BALANCED CHOICES
for a healthy lifestyle

Prescription for Nutrition Common Nutrition Stumbling Blocks Are You Missing the Big Picture?

The diets of many Americans are missing parts and pieces that prevent them from enjoying all the benefits a healthful diet and lifestyle has to offer. Six common stumbling blocks or “diet disconnects” have been identified here along with some practical tips and solutions to help overcome them.

Stumbling Block #1: Falling short on one or more food groups.

Many consumers aren't eating the recommended amounts of whole grains, dairy, fruits and vegetables. They may not know they are falling short, how many servings they need, or how to boost their intake.

Solution: Check out an eating plan such as MyPyramid or the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) Diet. These are both balanced eating plans, based on sound science, and easy to follow. For a customized eating plan based on your age, sex, height, weight and activity level, visit www.mypyramid.gov. See an example of the DASH Eating Plan based on 2,000 calories a day at www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/prevent/eating/dash.htm.

Stumbling Block #2: Portion distortion.

Americans have become oblivious to portion sizes. A recent study showed a “trickle-down effect” from oversized restaurant and fast food portions to supersized portions at home. These findings surprised even the researchers of the study at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, in which they analyzed portion data from three government surveys taken between 1977 and 1998.

Solution: Make more use of three simple words when ordering food out: “small,” “half” and “share,” says Melanie Polk, M.M.Sc., R.D., director of nutrition education at the American Institute for Cancer Research. At home, refer to the serving sizes listed on nutrition labels as a guide; they can be helpful tools. Also, balance small amounts of high calorie foods with larger amounts of low-calorie foods like broth-based soups and salads.

Stumbling Block#3: Following the latest fad.

Many popular diets and diet books are notorious for eliminating specific foods or even entire food groups. For example, some popular diets eliminate nutritious foods such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables and dairy products.

Solution: A balanced eating plan not only promotes good health, it can also help manage weight and prevent health problems like diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure. For example, recent research has linked consumption of lowfat and fat free dairy foods to weight loss, and eating plenty of fruits and vegetable has been shown to help control high blood pressure. Eating a balanced diet with a few carefully planned snacks can actually help you feel better and have more energy as you go through your day.

Stumbling Block #4: Missing the “moderation” message.

Many people believe that all foods fall into one of two categories: “good” foods or “bad” foods. This belief can lead to unnecessary frustration that prevents rather than promotes balanced, healthful eating.

Solution: On occasion, treats can be enjoyed as part of a balanced, healthful diet. Learn to make small “trade-offs” that can help alleviate feelings of deprivation and frustration. For example, if you eat a heavy lunch or helped a friend celebrate a birthday with a piece of cake, plan for a lighter dinner or a bowl of soup and a small salad. Think of the calories you need for energy like money you have to spend. Each person has a total calorie “budget.” This budget can be divided into “essentials” and “extras.” The “extras”, also called “discretionary calories” can be solid fats (butter, extra salad dressing) added sugars, desserts and alcohol. Most discretionary calorie allowances are very small, between 100 and 300 calories, especially for those who are not physically active. Check out the MyPyramid website at www.mypyramid.gov to learn about “discretionary calories.”

Stumbling Block #5: Wondering who’s the authority.

American consumers are bombarded daily with often-contradictory nutrition and health information from a variety of sources. Separating science-based advice from faulty information is no easy task. Sources of consumer health and nutrition information range from the government to the media and Internet, to the health food store clerk, family members and the next door neighbor.

Solution: Scientifically sound nutrition information can be found from sources like United States Department of Agriculture (www.mypyramid.gov), the American Dietetic Association (www.eatright.org) and the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (www.cfsan.gov).

Stumbling Block #6: Overlooking other lifestyle factors.

Someone who eats well, but smokes or is sedentary, is missing the big picture of good health.

Solution: While a balanced eating plan is an important part – but not the only part --- of a healthful lifestyle. Give equal time to practicing other health-promoting behaviors such as getting at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day, not smoking, managing stress and getting enough sleep.