

Editorial

Balance Diet Beyond the Reach of Most People

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Editor

Most physicians today would suggest a diet made up mostly of vegetables with meat and dairy products used to supplement the plant based foods. Of the meats, there exists some confusion but here again most doctors will suggest consuming an 'oily' fish at least twice a week and for the rest white meats and well-trimmed red meat as well as eggs are quite acceptable.

The idea is that meat and eggs should be mostly as side dishes rather than the primary meal. For carbohydrates, the most important idea is to avoid refined starches like white rice and white flour, and sugars. Whole wheat and other whole grains as well as lentils and beans are recommended.

It became controversial because many doctors felt that dietary fat of animal origin was responsible for increasing the amount of fat (cholesterol) in the blood and this lead to increase in heart artery blockages leading to heart attacks. So doctors recommended that consumption of fatty foods and animal fats like butter should be decreased.

Many people cut down the amount of fat they ate but to assuage hunger they ate a lot more carbohydrates especially bread. As a result more people became overweight. Becoming overweight led to another series of medical problems including high blood pressure and high blood sugar (diabetes). And these two problems led to an increase in heart attacks. So new 'studies' decided that fat in the diet wasn't all bad and did not really lead to high cholesterol.

The short answer to the question about fat is that a marbled steak, bread heaped with butter and other such stuff are fine as long as you don't eat it three times a day. And fats of vegetable origin are better than fats of animal origin. In other words, olive oil or canola oil is better than clarified butter (ghee) for regular use.

Once again, vegetables or rather plants of different types should form the basis of most diets. First and foremost plants produce the volume or roughage that fills us up and keeps our intestines working and pushing stuff through. Besides that plants are a source of many different nutrients including all 'water soluble' vitamins. The reason why I use the word plants is to include vegetables as well as fruits.

Most vegetables are eaten after being cooked and most fruits are eaten raw. The more colourful a fruit or vegetable is, the more nutrients it packs. And of course eating raw things like cucumbers, radishes and carrots as well as many fruits provides different vitamins and micronutrients. However, one important warning, all uncooked vegetables and fruits should be washed well with clean water before being consumed.

For protein chicken is about as good as it gets. So chicken is fine as a basic source of protein along with lentils, legumes and things like chickpeas. And occasional goat or lamb meat is also fine if it can be afforded. About chicken one important point. It must be cooked very well and entirely through and through to kill any bad bacteria that might be contaminating the meat.

For carbohydrates, whole grains like whole wheat are the best. But starchy vegetables like potatoes and yams (shakarkandi) are also recommended. The one thing that should be avoided or consumed as little as possible is sugar and drinks made with corn syrup. Sweets like *laddoos* and *gulab jamans* and cakes should also be consumed as rarely as possible. Fortunately, a majority of Pakistanis will find these goodies a bit too expensive for them to eat too often.

The importance of micronutrients or minerals that the body needs besides the vitamins. Here again a varied diet based on different vegetables, fruits, dairy products, eggs and meat will adequately make up for most micronutrients and vitamins. For pregnant women, folic acid and iron are important and might need to be provided as supplements though spinach is a good source for them.

Milk like fat keeps going in and out of favour among the medical community. Milk is an excellent balanced source of nutrition. And there is nothing wrong with consuming whole milk. Of course milk should not become the only source of fluids and it should be pasteurised or boiled before being consumed so that any bad bacteria in it might be killed. Pasteurisation of milk (heating it up to just below boiling point) was an important step to cut down the transmission of 'bovine tuberculosis' from cows to humans.

And that brings me to water. Clean water is one of the basic foods. As is well known, if we don't have water to drink, we tend to die. But sadly drinking contaminated water can also make us die. An average adult requires roughly one and a half litres of water in a day. This requirement goes up dramatically in hot weather and after strenuous physical activity or work.

About some particular nutrients. Vitamin D is vital for proper bone growth and strength. The body will synthesise this vitamin when exposed to sunlight. Sadly too many in our population are deprived of sunshine due to social and religious reasons. So added Vitamin D in foods like milk is a good idea. The other nutrient that is important for is Iodine. As a medical student 'goiter' or enlarged thyroid gland due to Iodine deficiency was a common sight. With Iodine added to salt this problem has almost disappeared.