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SUGGESTIONS FOR SELECTING A BALANCED DIET

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The general well-being of the body at all ages depends upon the use of a diet containing adequate amounts of all the food essentials. For want of a better expression we sometimes refer to this as a balanced diet -- one that includes foods that will supply sufficient protein, minerals, vitamins, and energy to meet the needs of the body. Though most foods are valuable for more than one nutritive constituent, no single food or group of foods furnishes all the necessary kinds of building, regulating and energy-yielding materials in an ideal proportion for the human body. The surest way to provide a balanced diet, then, is to use a variety of foods representing the different food groups: milk and its products, fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, and eggs, cereals, and fats and sugars.

Eggs, meat, poultry, fish, milk, and cheese are the chief sources of protein, a building substance necessary for body tissues and fluids.

Milk, milk products, eggs, fruits, and succulent vegetables, the so-called "protective" foods, contain minerals and vitamins essential for the development of bones and teeth, for the formation of red blood cells, for regulating growth and other body processes, and for maintaining general well-being. Milk and some of its products (cheese and whey) are our best sources of calcium; eggs, leafy green vegetables, liver, and lean red meat are good sources of iron. Whole milk, cream, butter, egg yolk, and green- and yellow-colored vegetables provide vitamin A. Whole grain cereals, especially the germ portion, are valuable in the diet as sources of vitamin B. The citrus fruits (oranges, lemons, grapefruit), tomatoes, cabbage, and turnip greens are very rich in vitamin C. Cod-liver oil, halibut-liver oil, salmon oil, and fish oils generally are rich in both vitamin D and vitamin A.

Cereals and cereal products, starchy vegetables, sugars, and fats are classed as energy foods because as a group they provide mainly fuel or calories, though they may be significant sources of some minerals, vitamins, or both (for example, whole grain cereals, potatoes, butter).

Daily food needs

One or two average servings each day of a protein food (eggs, meat, poultry, fish, or cheese) will ordinarily be sufficient to meet the protein requirement. Milk if used abundantly in cooking or to drink will contribute considerable protein to the day's diet. Many other foods (beans and other legumes and whole grain cereals) contain some protein which supplements the main sources.

Milk and milk products, eggs, fruits, and vegetables should be used liberally at all times because of their mineral and vitamin content. The variety of fruits and vegetables for the day should include at least one green- or yellow-colored vegetable, at least one other kind of vegetable besides potato, and some kind of fruit, making a total of four servings. Five or six servings afford better assurance of meeting mineral and vitamin needs. Macaroni, spaghetti, and highly milled rice should not be counted as vegetable dishes; they are refined cereal products which provide mainly calories or fuel value.

The daily use of green- or yellow-colored vegetables is recommended because of their iron and vitamin A content. Oranges, grapefruit, or another kind of citrus fruit or tomatoes should appear in the menu frequently because of the daily need for vitamin C. This vitamin is easily destroyed by heat except in the presence of acid; tomatoes retain much of their vitamin C content when cooked or canned, and are an inexpensive source of this vitamin the year round. Serving a raw or quickly-cooked green vegetable each day helps to provide the amount of vitamin C needed.

To insure a sufficient supply of vitamin D in the diet of very young children and of pregnant and nursing mothers, and to increase the vitamin A content of their diet, fish-liver oil or another concentrated source of these vitamins is recommended.

Energy foods round out fuel value or calories for the day, and should be eaten in quantities proportionate to a person's body weight and activity. Fats, starches, and sugars (or foods rich in one or more of these materials, as gravies and sauces, bread and other cereal products, root vegetables, starchy puddings, rich sweet desserts) are energy foods. A very active person uses more energy than one doing sedentary work.

Children require more energy materials in proportion to their weight than do adults. Regular gains in height and weight are one measure of sufficient calorie intake in children, though such gains are not necessarily an indication that all the needs of good nutrition are being met. Suitable energy foods for children are whole grain breakfast cereals, bread and butter, and nourishing vegetable dishes, provided as a part of a well-balanced diet high in the protective foods.

Controlling body weight

An adult in good health may judge how satisfactorily his energy requirement is being met by taking note of body weight at regular intervals. A steady increase in weight in a healthy adult is usually an indication that he is eating energy foods in excess of activity needs and is storing body fat. On the other hand, a decrease in weight may indicate that the energy requirement or calorie intake is less than the amount being used up by the body. Adjusting the amount of fuel foods to the fuel requirement of the individual is the principle on which safe and sane dieting up or down the scale is done. Many persons in normal health may wish to increase or decrease body weight. Furthermore, there are illnesses in which a gain in weight is desirable and others in which the attending physician finds it important for the patient to reduce his weight. Drastic dieting should not be attempted without medical supervision.

Planning family diets

Farmers' Bulletin 1757, "Diets to fit the family income," outlines four diet plans that differ in cost and in food value. In working out the diet plans for this bulletin, calories, vitamins, minerals, and other nutritive needs for the person in normal health were calculated. Because of this fact, and the information the bulletin contains on selecting foods by groups, as well as its suggested menus, it is a practical guide in planning the family diet. Farmers' Bulletin 1674, "Food for children," contains a popular discussion of the food needs of children, and suggests menus especially desirable for children but suitable for the whole family. These two bulletins are available through the Office of Information of the Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

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