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What to Eat: Revisiting the Basics

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What to eat? Nearly every day we may hear or read about the benefits or risks of certain foods or specific elements in foods. Sometimes, we may be tempted to try some hard-to-believe, miraculous food or food product, which later may turn out to be of little value. With so many daunting warnings about what we should eat and why, it is no wonder that many of us just give up trying to change.

I want to offer some nutritional basics and highlights that may help guide you when making food choices. As always, check with your health professional before undergoing any dietary changes, as existing health conditions or prescription medicines may restrict certain food choices.

Food basics: First, foods are listed in three categories which are all essential for our bodies: carbohydrates, fats

and proteins. Many foods we eat may contain more than one food category, such as milk, which is categorized as a carbohydrate but has proteins and fats, too.

Carbohydrates may be complex carbohydrates, such as whole grains, vegetables and fiber-rich fruits which are the healthiest for our bodies. Carbohydrates may also be simple, such as sugar, white flour and white rice, which are not as nutritious. All fats aren't equal, either. Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids, such as those found in fish, nuts, avocados and olive or canola oil offer the most helpful types for our body. For proteins, consider lean meats, fish, poultry, nuts and beans as these contain the least amount of saturated fats which can clog our body with unneeded weight or other fat-related health issues.



According to Dr. Lauro S. Halstead, for muscles to have a fighting chance to maintain or increase their strength, there should be a generous amount of protein in the diet.¹ Polio survivors have something in common with athletes – they both often exert excessive strain on their muscles and so may need extra protein to help maintain whatever level of strength they have.

Nutritionists often encourage including some protein at each meal, beginning with breakfast. Our first daily meal could include protein from an egg, nuts sprinkled on cereal, some type of nut butter on toast, lean meat and/or a milk

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Ann Crocker is a co-founder of the Post-Polio Support Group of Maine, established in 1986. She also serves on PHI's Polio Survivor Advisory Committee. While not a trained nutritionist, Ann has been an avid reader of nutritional books and reports for at least 50 years. In this article, she shares some of her thoughts on healthy eating.

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product which contains some protein. Guidelines for the general public include only about 5 to 6 ounces of protein per day, which is the equivalent in size to a deck of cards plus 3 or 4 tablespoons, but you may choose, as I have, to increase your intake of protein to help sustain adequate protein needs.

While carbohydrates, fats and proteins are the dietary basics, let's break down these three categories by types of food, which is how most of us shop. The main types include dairy, fruits, vegetables, fats, meats, fish, poultry, nuts, dry beans and grains of all kinds. We need to eat foods from all types. Also, it's important to eat foods containing enough fiber to maintain a healthy digestive process. We actually do need fats, too, but try to keep them around 5 to 6 teaspoons per day, as fat calories add up very quickly!



Dairy Dairy products contain much-needed calcium, protein, vitamins, carbohydrates and other minerals. Three cups per day of low-fat milk, or its equivalent, will provide most people with adequate dairy needs. One ounce or about 1¹/₄ to 1¹/₂-inch cube of cheese is equivalent to one cup of milk. Yogurt also offers many probiotics that help the digestive system. Health conditions, such as osteoporosis, may necessitate working with a health professional to determine the appropriate quantity of dairy foods.



Fruits We are encouraged to eat at least five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day, with the total amount depending upon age, size and activity level. A serving is about 1/2 cup of cooked or 1 cup of uncooked fruits or vegetables. Try filling up a 1/2 measuring cup with a cooked vegetable, then pouring it onto a dinner plate. That gives you a rough estimate of a serving size. For those over 50, consider consuming 2 cups of vegetables and 1 1/2 cups of fruit per day for women and an additional 1/2 cup each for men.



Grains Let's not leave out the importance of grains in our diet. When choosing breads, those containing whole grains and fiber are more nutritious.

If currently eating white (simple carbohydrate) pasta or rice, try gradually incorporating a fraction of whole grain pastas or rice with the white type. You may find that the taste, texture and added fiber is so beneficial that you will switch to fully whole grain carbohydrates.

The newer, white whole wheat flour has a lighter texture than regular whole wheat. Replacing about 1/3 of white flour with this white whole wheat flour in recipes will add fiber and extra nutrition, with little change in the look or texture. One serving of grains is 1 ounce, or about one cup of whole grain cereal, one slice

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of bread, 1/2 cup cooked pasta, rice or cooked cereal. A daily serving ranges from 5 to 6 ounces for those over 50, with an average activity level of 30 minutes per day.

Moderation and variety have been my long-standing guidelines. I avoid fads where one either gorges on certain foods or skips some kinds altogether. The importance of our body needing a large variety of vitamins and minerals has been known for a long time. To obtain them, we need to eat a large variety of foods, and while food must be at the forefront of providing these essential elements, taking vitamin/mineral supplements may help ensure our body gets adequate amounts.

Various beneficial compounds, known as antioxidants, are found naturally in food or man-made supplements and may help to protect against cell damage from harmful molecules called free radicals. Vitamins C, E and beta-carotene are among the most studied dietary antioxidants.

There are many other important nutrients that can best be found only in food. Plants provide a wide variety of compounds known as phytochemicals, contributing protective or disease-preventive properties.

For example, flavonoids are one of the largest groups of these phytochemicals, with only 1,000 of these specific flavonoids researched. One subgroup, anthocyanins, provides the deep red, purple and blue colors in foods such as in berries, radishes, red cabbage, eggplant skins, beets, red-fleshed peaches and apples. In addition to possible antioxidant properties, flavonoids offer such health benefits as aiding visual acuity, improving cardiovascular strength and acting as an anti-inflammatory.

Don't forget the herbs and spices, either! Replacing salt with these alternatives helps reduce excessive sodium intake common in our diets. Adding these extra zips to our meals is not just flavorful, but offers health benefits, too. For example, cayenne, chili powder and paprika have capsaicin,

which has cardiovascular and anti-inflammatory benefits. Cinnamon can improve blood sugar levels and may lower cholesterol – try sprinkling it on toast or oatmeal. Ginger provides digestive relief and has anti-flatulence properties.

Add a little more color to your diet by including fruits and vegetables offered in the basic rainbow colors of red, orange, yellow/light green, green and blue/purple. Each fruit and vegetable contains a slightly different array of vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals and important fiber that helps protect cells from damage. For example, apples, beets, cherries, cranberries, pomegranates, red plums, tomatoes, strawberries and watermelon are some red-colored fruits and vegetables.

If you want more information on all the types and daily recommended amounts of food, you may want to check out a U.S. government website. The Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture have compiled an updated food pyramid, or plate, which can be found at www.choosemyplate.gov. Specifics are broken down by age and male/female, and it also lists benefits of each type of food. Many of the specific quantities listed in this article were taken from this website.

I think we all ought to relax and occasionally enjoy something that might not be the healthiest choice, but is so enjoyable. Sometimes, it may not be possible to eat all the recommended nutrients, but don't give up trying. Just get back on track when you can. I believe that eating a nutritious diet, drinking enough water and exercising at a level compatible with your physical condition will help keep polio survivors going in the best condition we can be. ■

Reference

1. "Nutrition and Post-Polio," Lauro S. Halstead, MD, *Post-Polio Health*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Winter 1998.

Note: This is the first article about nutrition and weight loss. The next article on the topic will appear in *Post-Polio Health*, Volume 32, Number 3. The issue will also feature the next article in our series of "where to live."

