

Cracking nutrition myths

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Avoid eggs. Drink eight glasses of water each day. Load up on protein after a workout. Stay away from bread.

We get a lot of nutrition advice from friends, family members, the Internet and health professionals. Some of it's good, some is questionable, and some is just downright wrong and drives me crazy.

March is National Nutrition Month, an appropriate time to debunk common food and diet myths.

If you're thinking about adopting some of these so-called healthy habits, keep reading to separate nutrition fact from fiction.

Myth: Eating eggs raises cholesterol

Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of Canadians still think that the amount of cholesterol you eat is a major factor in your blood cholesterol level.

Yes, eggs are a concentrated source of cholesterol (one yolk has 190 milligrams). But cholesterol in foods - be it egg yolks, shrimp, meat, high-fat dairy - has little or no impact on most people's cholesterol level. Plus, research has shown that eating an egg a day does not boost the risk of heart disease or stroke.

Instead of cutting eggs from your diet, reduce your intake of saturated (animal) and trans fats, the most important factors that raise LDL (bad) cholesterol. Choose lean cuts of meat, poultry breast and low-fat dairy products. Avoid commercial baked goods, snack foods, deep-fried food and certain margarines made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, a source of trans fat.

Myth: Carbohydrates make you fat

Despite the fact that low-carb weight-loss diets have fallen out of favour, this myth still persists: Bread, cereal, pasta and rice make you fat. Carbohydrates don't make you fat. Excess calories - whether from protein, fat or carbohydrates - cause weight gain.

Your muscles and brain rely on carbohydrates for energy. What's more, plenty of research has found that a regular intake of whole grains helps guard against heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

Limit refined sugars, white starches and carbohydrates that are quickly digested and leave you feeling hungry sooner. Include whole grains at meals - just watch your portion size.

Myth: A high-protein diet builds muscle

It's true that athletes have higher protein requirements than sedentary people. Extra protein is needed to repair muscle damage that occurs during exercise and to support muscle building.

But if you work out, you don't need to resort to an Atkins-style diet - or fill up on protein shakes - to get the extra protein you need. Studies show that most athletes can easily meet their daily protein requirements from a mixed diet.

If you're trying to build muscle mass, increasing your protein intake beyond the recommended level won't build bigger muscles because there's a limit to the rate at which protein can be synthesized into muscle.

Unlike carbohydrate and fat, the body can't store protein. The excess will either be burned for energy or, if you're getting the calories you need, it will be tucked away as fat.

Myth: You need eight glasses of water each day

Yes, water is an essential nutrient. Your body needs it to regulate its temperature, transport nutrients to cells, keep your skin moist and cushion your joints.

And you must replace what your body loses every day. (The average adult loses about 2.5 litres of water each day just through breathing, sweating and excreting wastes. Exercise, hot temperatures and humidity cause your body to lose even more.)

According to the American Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, adult males need to drink 13 cups (3 litres) of water each day; women require nine cups (2.2 litres). But all beverages - excluding alcoholic beverages - count toward your daily water requirements. Water, fruit juice, milk, soy beverages, soft drinks, even coffee and tea help keep you hydrated.

So you can relax with the water bottle. You don't need to drink eight glasses of water on top of everything else you drink.

Myth: Drinking milk prevents osteoporosis

As a dietitian in private practice, I often hear clients express surprise when they learn they have low bone mass or osteoporosis, despite a lifetime of drinking milk.

Calcium - from dairy and other foods - is critical for developing strong bones and delaying age-related bone loss. No argument there. But it takes more than meeting your daily calcium needs to protect your bones from osteoporosis.

A diet that supplies - in addition to calcium - adequate protein, vitamin D, vitamin K and magnesium along with regular weight-bearing exercise (such as brisk walking, jogging, weight training) plays an important role in maintaining strong bones.

Myth: Skipping meals helps you lose weight

Missing meals in an effort to save calories can actually hinder weight-loss efforts. If you make it a regular practice, skipping meals can slow your metabolism. Your body thinks it's in starvation mode and burns fewer calories to compensate.

What's more, people who skip breakfast and lunch often end up eating more calories later in the day than if they ate smaller meals more frequently during the day.

A better approach to weight loss: Eat three balanced meals and one or two snacks to help keep your blood sugar stable and hunger at bay.

Myth: Fresh vegetables are more nutritious than frozen

Fresh produce may not be as fresh as you think. By the time it travels from farm to supermarket to your dinner plate, a few weeks may have passed, during which time nutrients are lost.

Research has shown that many frozen vegetables (and fruits) rival or outshine fresh as a source of vitamins and minerals. That's because processing and packaging takes place almost immediately after harvest, locking in more nutrients.

When fresh produce is out of season, or out of your price range, frozen is a good alternative to have on hand. Just stay clear of brands with added salt.

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