

Eating for a Good Time *and* a Long Time

By Joanna Durfee, OMS-III

Food can be a powerful tool. How we fuel directly affects how efficiently our bodies run daily as well as how efficiently our bodies will run in the future. How we eat today can have tremendous effects on how well we prevent chronic diseases, such as type II diabetes, from controlling our life. A diet high in vegetables and fruits has been shown to decrease all-cause mortality, including mortality due to coronary heart disease, stroke and some forms of cancer¹. A nutrient and protein-rich diet staves off cachexia and increases the functional status in elderly patients². Whether our goal is to fight off chronic disease or to fit into our favorite pair of jeans, the relationship that we have with food directly affects how successful we will be at achieving both long-term and short-term goals. Eating real, one-ingredient foods, being grateful for the energy they give us, and allowing ourselves some dietary wiggle-room unlocks the power of sustainable, healthy eating.

What is meant by real food? It's food that is either alive or once was alive. It's food that doesn't need an ingredients list. If you've followed a dieting program before, you've likely experienced the annoyance of checking every nutrition label on your food to see if it fits within your dieting parameters. When you eat one-ingredient foods, there is no label to check. What are the ingredients in a carrot? Well, it's just carrot. How about chicken? It's just chicken. Vegetables, fruits, meats, nuts and seeds are all foods that humans have lived on for centuries. Our bodies know what to do with them. Chances are if we are eating foods with ingredients we can't pronounce, our body's machinery doesn't know what they are either.



Photo by Joanna Durfee

Many foods that are marketed to us have been processed in order to extend the food's shelf-life.

Most of the foods found in the middle of the grocery store have been processed and contain ingredients our bodies are not used to digesting. The principle of eating real, non-processed foods applies to everything we put in our bodies. Studies on healthy men and women have shown that diets high in processed meats, potato chips and fried foods are associated with weight gain¹. These are all examples of processed oils. Natural oils (like avocado oil, olive oil

and coconut oil) are easily processed by our bodies whereas manufactured oils (like margarine, shortening, canola oil and vegetable oil) are not processed as well by our bodies. Sticking to a primary diet of one-ingredient foods such as vegetables, fruits, meat, nuts, seeds and healthy fats will do wonders for your energy and insulin levels!



Photo by Joanna Durfee

How do you make healthy eating fun and sustainable?

If you've ever competed in a "no-sugar" challenge, you know how much your palate can change. Staying away from processed foods and eating only real foods can act as a reset button for our taste buds. The next time you eat a highly processed food product, like a candy bar, close your eyes and chew it more times than you normally would and really taste what you are eating. If you have been eating healthy, real food, chances are you will taste chemicals that you hadn't noticed before. Now do the same thing with a bite of your favorite fruit. You can taste the difference of real food versus processed sugar. Having a deep appreciation for how delicious real food can be is the key to

sustainable healthy eating. Try shopping for your groceries at a farmer's market and your local butcher. It can be really fun and educational to learn more about where your food comes from and the miracle of energy that real food gives us. Encourage your family and friends to join you in eating one-ingredient foods. Get excited about making new dinners. Involve the whole family in making meals together. Eating healthy shouldn't be a punishment. It should be one of your favorite parts of life. It feels so good to respect yourself and to respect the fuel that you put inside your body!

Now we know what healthy eating looks like, but what about when we get those cravings for "off-limit," processed foods? Many dieting programs provide rigid restrictions on certain types of food. Creating inflexible limitations makes for unsustainable eating that is bound to lead to failure. If feeling like a failure while dieting is an emotion you've felt, don't feel bad! It's not your fault, it's just how our brains are wired. It's object fixation. For example, if we are riding a mountain biking trail and we notice a rock in the middle of the trail, we can get fixated on that object and might end up hitting it, even though there was plenty of space on the trail to avoid it. If you are on a diet that eliminates your all-time favorite treats, you might get so fixated on not having your favorite treats that you break your diet with a total treat binge. This is where

having a positive relationship with food comes in to play. If you are adhering to eating mostly real foods and you get a craving for a snack that doesn't pass the one-ingredient challenge, it's okay to eat it (barring any food allergies). Knowing that you will be forgiving and allow yourself to partake in a treat every once in awhile takes away the fixation on food and allows for healthy eating habits that can truly last a lifetime!

The United States has a rapidly changing nutritional environment, where more emphasis is placed on dining out³, creating foods with a longer shelf life, and including addictive, processed ingredients in food products. Although it can be frustrating living in this environment, understanding what's in our food and how it will be used to give us energy makes the equation simpler. The key to sustainable, healthy eating is to fuel your body with real, quality foods, make eating a fun part of your life, and be forgiving of yourself. Respect your body and respect the food you put inside of it!

References:

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3. Glanz, K. et al. (2005). Healthy nutritional environments: concepts and measures. *The Science of Health Promotion*