



## **Food and Optimal Health (A Four Part Series)**

### **Part 1 – What are we *REALLY* eating?**

**By Danna A. Al-Tourah**

Today, people are becoming more aware of the impact personal choices have on overall health. We all know that diet, exercise, lifestyle choices, relationships, and stress management all have a direct impact on our overall wellbeing. These factors affect our weight, immune system, energy levels, how well we sleep, our likeliness of developing certain diseases (like cancer, diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, osteoporosis), and our psychological health.

Yet, diabetes and obesity rates are on the rise, especially among children, and heart disease, cancer, and other illnesses are becoming more common. With all the information available on the dynamics of food on your health, the general population is far from eating health supportive diets.

What gives? When it comes to food, most people are misinformed about what eating well for their health really entails. For the most part, when people think about “healthy” eating, what comes to mind are foods that run along the lines of “low fat”, “no fat”, “zero calories”, “reduced” this and that, diet food programs and unrealistic diet fads that, quite honestly, do not work for the most part, especially in the long term. If anything, they could be doing more harm than good.

What we eat not only affects our waistline, but our overall health. The *initial* challenge in taking on health supportive eating habits is to recognize the difference between foods that nurture and foods that are stripped of nutritional value. To put it more simply, foods found in nature nurture, and prepackaged meals and other foods found in colorful cardboard packaging are most probably devoid of necessary antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and fibers. Your body recognizes the difference between real, natural, whole foods, and processed, enriched, fortified, and synthetic versions of food.

With that said, let’s go beyond counting the calories, carbs, and fat grams for argument’s sake, and take a look at what it is that people are really eating in our modern day world.

The general population has become almost completely reliant on packaged and processed “foods”. Be aware and able to see beyond the bright, large fonts of marketing claims that are paraded on packaged foods. It’s best to stay away from packaged foods all together, as most are highly processed, refined, full of artificial flavors, stabilizers, emulsifiers, fillers, artificial coloring, preservatives, and additives. Not to mention the trans fats (aka partially hydrogenated oil) which are most commonly found in commercially packaged foods and fast food. Trans fats increase harmful cholesterol LDL and lower

beneficial cholesterol HDL, in addition to depressing immune system response, interfering with reproductive activity, among fostering other harmful health concerns.

The processing of food (fast food and commercially packaged foods for the most part) for the purpose of mass production, cost cutting and extending shelf life translates into food that is nutrient-depleted, which may explain to some extent why we overeat and have cravings, as our bodies hunger for macronutrients (fats, proteins, carbohydrates, and water) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) to function and survive.

It's the quality of the food source that separates the healthy from the unhealthy, it's the difference between getting your carbohydrates from refined carbs, like white sugar and white flour and getting your carbohydrates from whole grains, like brown rice and spelt.

Fresh, real, natural and whole foods are disease preventative and healing. They nurture organs, strengthen the immune system and bone mass, regulate the digestive system, and cleanse and regulate blood, among impacting number of other physiological and psychological attributes.

#### **How do you separate the good from the bad?**

**Rule #1: Do not be misled by claims on the front of the package.** Catch phrases like "sugar free", "whole grain", "all natural", "low fat", "low carb" can be mesmerizing! You would be better off ignoring the "health oriented" jargon on the front and turning the package around to read the fine print, that is, the INGREDIENTS list, that's what you should be reading instead. Note that ingredients are listed in descending order from the most prevalent ingredient to the least. You'll be surprised to discover that many "healthy" breakfast bars and cereals have sugar listed among the first 2 or 3 ingredients, which tells you there's lots of sugar in the food, and it's not as healthy as it claims to be!

**Rule #2: If you can't pronounce an ingredient or recognize it as a natural food, don't eat it!** In other words, if it doesn't have a mother or grow in or from the ground, put it back on the shelf, it's not food!

**Rule #3: Keep it real!** Buy foods that come from nature and not from a conglomerate institution! Fill your fridge and pantry with colorful whole fresh fruit and vegetables (buy what's in season), lentils and beans (fresh or dry, not canned), nuts and seeds (raw, not flavored), and whole grains (oats, brown rice, wild rice, quinoa, barley, spelt, whole wheat, rye, millet, etc.). Choose organic dairy and eggs, organic free range meats and chicken, and unfarmed (wild) fresh fish. Don't forget to incorporate herbs, spices and healthy oils (cold pressed extra virgin olive oil and coconut oil for example), as they also contain plenty of nutrients.

**Rule #4: Listen to your body, and keep it simple and light.** Eat what suites your dietary needs, and see how you feel after eating certain foods, you may find that some foods agree with you more than others. Don't overeat! Remember that it's not normal to feel like you need to take a nap after each meal. Take your time with meals and stop eating when you no longer feel hungry.

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