



EATING WELL FOR OPTIMAL HEALING: *Dietary suggestions for pain management*

What and how we eat are important factors in recovering and maintaining optimal health. Eating habits can support healing—or can prolong injury, pain, and suffering. Below are some simple dietary suggestions to promote injury recovery and overall well-being.

Reducing pain and suffering from pain

The neurotransmitter serotonin, which the body makes from dietary tryptophan, is an important mediator of both pain and mood. Serotonin deficiencies reduce the ability to control pain—leading to lower pain thresholds and tolerance. Serotonin also regulates mood, and deficiencies can increase the risks of depression, anxiety and suffering from pain.

- ✓ **Foods to eat:** Yogurt, bananas, turkey, dark leafy greens all contain tryptophan.

Reducing chronic inflammation

Chronic inflammation is a part of most pain syndromes and slows tissue healing. While some foods contribute to inflammation, others help to control it.

- ✓ **Foods to eat:** foods containing essential fatty acids: flaxseed meal or oil; fish (especially cold water fish: herring, sardines, anchovies); walnuts; free-range or grass-fed beef; olive and canola oil. Soy and mung bean products, dark green vegetables, seaweeds, and yams/sweet potatoes are also beneficial.
- ✓ **Foods to minimize or eliminate:** foods containing high-fructose corn syrup, cane sugar of any kind, or trans-fatty acids (hydrogenated oils); animal fats should also be minimized (choose lean poultry/animals (turkey, buffalo, venison), or lean cuts of other meats).

Providing nutritional building blocks

- ✓ **Proteins** are essential tissue building blocks. Omnivores generally get enough protein, but vegetarians should insure they are getting adequate protein from dairy (non- or low-fat), eggs, beans, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and mushrooms.
- ✓ **Lignans** are a class of molecules particularly used to repair the tendons and fascia that are often involved in pain and disability. Lignans are found in dark leafy greens.
- ✓ **Bone and tendon** soups and stocks are traditionally used in China for musculoskeletal health,

Promoting a healthy balance of key minerals. Calcium, magnesium, and silicon are essential to bone and connective tissue health. These minerals are best absorbed from whole foods, rather than supplements:

- ✓ **Calcium:** Seaweeds contain the most calcium of any food. Other foods with absorbable calcium include: sardines and salmon; non-fat, fermented dairy (yogurt, kefir, cottage cheese); almonds, hazel, sunflower, pistachio, brazil and walnuts; all beans; quinoa and amaranth; and most sprouts and dark leafy greens.
- ✓ **Calcium inhibitors should be minimized:** Sugar, sweeteners, and coffee actually leech calcium out of bones. Protein from meat, and a few otherwise nutritious fruits and vegetables that contain oxalic acid, a calcium inhibitor, should be eaten only in moderation. High-oxalic vegetables include: spinach, chard, beet greens, rhubarb, cranberries, and plums. Soaking whole grains and legumes for several hours before cooking reduces their content of phytic acid, which binds to minerals and removes them from the body.
- ✓ **Magnesium:** essential for calcium absorption. Magnesium reverses a destructive cycle (initiated by sugar, sweeteners) that removes calcium from bones and deposits it in soft tissue, leading to osteoporosis *and* arthritis. Foods in order of magnesium content: seaweeds, beans, whole grains, nuts, seeds.
- ✓ **Silicon:** also essential for calcium absorption, is found in alfalfa, lettuce, parsnips, buckwheat, millet, oats, brown rice, dandelion greens, strawberries, celery, cucumber, apricots, and carrots.

Maintaining a healthy weight

Excess body fat contributes to injury, pain, and poor recovery. Increased weight places mechanical strains on structures that are designed for lighter loads. The body also stores toxins in fat, and obesity contributes to chronic inflammation. Pain can make exercise difficult, easily leading to weight gains that increase risks for diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. Along with adequate exercise (minimum half-hour/day for adults), healthy eating habits are essential for reversing the pain/disability/weight gain cycle and promoting recovery. Dietary theories for controlling weight abound, but simple, widely accepted guidelines include:

- ✓ **Consumer fewer calories** than you use each day through basic metabolism and activity.
- ✓ **Foods to eat:** Fruits, vegetables, non-fat dairy, fish, whole grains, and small amounts of lean meats and poultry. Cook using water or low-sodium stocks rather than with fats and oils, or use only cooking oils high in essential fatty acids (olive, canola, and sesame).
- ✓ **Foods to minimize or eliminate:** Refined and processed grain products (pastas, breads, baked goods); sugar and other high-caloric sweeteners; animal fats, hydrogenated oils and trans-fatty acids, and low-grade cooking oils (such as are used in deep-frying). The caloric content of pre-made salad dressings can be the highest calorie part of a meal; choose simple olive oil & vinegar dressings instead.

Eating habits: a few simple tips

- ✓ **“Eat like an emperor at breakfast, like a prince at lunch, and like a pauper at dinner”** (Chinese proverb). The body uses food for fuel, and fuel consumed in the evening is largely stored in fat deposition overnight, rather than consumed by activity during the day.
- ✓ **Begin meals with foods high in fiber and water content**, which fill up the stomach and reduce appetite. Examples: salads, vegetables, soups.
- ✓ **Eat protein with each meal, and minimize simple carbohydrates** (refined grains, sugars, fruit juices, and potatoes) to keep blood sugar levels stable, thus reducing post-meal fatigue and drowsiness and the urge to snack as a “pick-me-up.”
- ✓ **Read labels carefully and ask for information**—many products marketed as “natural” and “low-carb” contain high-caloric sweeteners, fats, and trans-fatty acids. Innocuous-looking coffee drinks and flavored waters may have as many calories as sodas; the healthiest-looking “snack bars” may have as many calories as rich deserts.
- ✓ **Cooking at home from scratch** allows you to choose the healthiest ingredients while avoiding the harmful. Remember that restaurants and processed food vendors add sweeteners and fats to their meals to provide the immediate gratification that keeps customers coming back for more.
- ✓ **Enjoy your meals, with others!** If our senses are distracted by driving, computer use, working, watching TV, reading, etc. while eating, the body is slower to reach satiety—it doesn’t register food intake! Eating alone has a similar effect, and we tend to eat less in company. Appreciating our food, in the company of other people, reduces our appetite for second helpings and snacks to get that “satisfied” feeling.

Promoting optimal health

The closer the food is to its original natural state, the better the body can use it for tissue repair.

- ✓ **Foods to eat:** Locally grown, organic, seasonal, and unprocessed foods. Frozen vegetables are also nutritious because essential nutrients are well preserved with flash freezing (this is *not* true for canned and other packaged foods). Organic foods contain more anti-oxidant phytochemicals than conventional foods.
- ✓ **Foods to minimize or eliminate:** Highly processed foods, “fast” foods, canned vegetables, foods containing artificial preservatives and additives; out-of-season and out-of-state foods that become nutrient- (and flavor-) depleted during storage and transportation.

Sources and Resources

- ✓ Wellness Letter: The Newsletter of Nutrition, Fitness, and Self-Care. University of California, Berkeley. Subscribe at WellnessLetter.com
- ✓ *Healing with Whole Foods: Oriental Traditions and Modern Nutrition*. Paul Pitchford, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California, 1993. ISBN 0-938190-64-4.