WHAT IS A HEALTHY, BALANCED DIET?

FOOD MATTERS

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"Overall, most nutritionists would agree that the diet with the most evidence for health benefits is the Mediterranean diet," says Dr Megan Rossi. "High in plant-based foods, extra virgin olive oil, nuts, seeds, small amounts of meat and some fish"

WE'RE told regularly that we should be eating a healthy, balanced diet, but how many of us are actually doing it? And do we even know what it really means? For this first report in our special *Food Matters* series, we're going to take an overall look at what our diets should and shouldn't include. Then, in the coming weeks, we'll be looking more closely at specific aspects of our diets and how our food gets to us. So, shall we tuck in?

VEG AND VARIETY

Although people don't agree on some of the trickier questions, the basics of a balanced diet are very well understood. We highly recommend reading the NHS's Eatwell Guide (**www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well**) and Change4Life (**www.nhs.uk/change4life**) pages, but the general idea is that you should eat as wide a range of healthy foods as possible. "Variety's the very spice of life, that gives it all its flavour," as William Cowper's epic poem *The Task* famously put it.

We know you've all heard of your five a day, but it should be "at least" five portions of a variety of fruit and veg. And that doesn't mean five bananas! Mix it up with different colours – and fresh, frozen, tinned or dried all count. Juice or smoothies can be one of your five, but the sugar in juice is worse for your teeth and counts towards your daily added sugar limit, whereas the natural sugar in a whole bit of fruit doesn't.

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Switching an unhealthy dessert for natural/unsweetened yoghurt and berries is much healthier. Dr Megan Rossi also recommends live yoghurt, as it contains good bacteria that can help to keep you and your gut healthy

DON'T FORGET THE CARBS

Carbohydrates are found in foods like bread, oats, rice, pasta and potatoes. It's important to include these in your diet, but some are certainly better for you than others. It's best to choose wholegrain varieties and potatoes with the skin on (not chips!), as these include more dietary fibre, which we'll talk about in a minute.

We'll look at meat and dairy in more detail soon, but the Eatwell Guide says that milk, cheese and yoghurt are good sources of protein and vitamins, as well as an important source of calcium. If you're dairy-free, unsweetened dairy substitutes with added calcium are good alternatives. You should also try not to overdo it with butter, and choose unsaturated alternatives, such as olive oil.

Meat and fish are good for protein, vitamins and minerals, but pulses such as peas, beans and lentils are great high-fibre alternatives. There's lots of evidence that shows processed meat like bacon, sausages and ham aren't good for us, so you should eat less of them. The same goes for other processed food, such as microwave meals.

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GIVE YOUR GUT SOME GOODNESS

When you eat, you're not just feeding yourself – you're also feeding the trillions of bacteria and other microbes in your gut. This 'microbiota' is a "little inner universe of potential," according to gut health expert Dr Megan Rossi (@TheGutHealthDoc). The latest research shows our microbiota affects pretty much every other organ in the body, and can improve our physical and mental health if we look after it. Rossi says that you should aim for 20-30 different plant-based foods a week, which is easier than it sounds. For instance, at breakfast, you can "sprinkle on a teaspoon of mixed seeds to get four points," she says. "Instead of getting one lettuce, get a multipack."

Our gut microbes provide us with vitamins and minerals, "but if we don't look after them then they get a bit grumpy!" says Rossi. She says that fibre from a diversity of plant-based foods is the key to a healthy diet, but that in the UK, only 6% of boys and 2% of girls aged 11-18 get enough fibre. Humans can't digest fibre, so its only purpose is to feed our microbiota. There's also some evidence that a narrow range of microbes can lead to obesity, so a broader diet could help with the obesity crisis.

HOW TO READ A FOOD LABEL

Not everyone likes the 'traffic light' labels on food but, if you know how to read them, they can be useful. It also helps if you understand percentages, so pay attention in maths! Red means the product is high in fat, sugar or salt; green means that it's low; while amber means it's somewhere in the middle. But always read the ingredients, as something like muesli could be high in sugar even though it contains healthy dried fruit rather than added sugar. And houmous with olive oil is very healthy but is high in fat; however, it's low in saturated fat, which is generally the unhealthier kind.

Per 100g					
ENERGY 1137KJ 271KCAL	ENERGY 1478KJ 352KCAL	FAT 14.6g	SATURATES 6.6g	SUGARS 4.0g	SALT 1.46g
	18%	21%	33%	4%	24%

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A typical 'traffic light' label showing a food that contains a third of an adult's daily allowance of saturated fat

Questions on 'Food Matters – What is a healthy, balanced diet?'

Part A: Find and explain the facts

A1. According to most nutritionists, what is the diet with the most evidence of health benefits?

A2. What are the benefits of the following foods?

Bread, oats, rice, pasta and potatoes	
Meat and fish	
Pulses, such as beans and lentils	
Milk, cheese and yoghurt	

A3. Which types of meat should we eat less of?

A4. What is our microbiota?

A5. Describe how to read a 'traffic light' food label.

Part B: Deduce and infer information

B1. Why is it better to eat a whole piece of fruit instead of drinking fruit juice or a smoothie?

B2. Why does Megan Rossi describe microbiota as a "little universe of potential"?

B3. Why is Megan Rossi quoted in this report?

B4. Why is it significant that in the UK, only 6% of boys and 2% of girls aged 11-18 get enough fibre?

B5. Why is it important to read the ingredients, even if a food has a "traffic light" label on it?

Part C: Analyse the writing and presentation

C1. Analyse the use of the question: "So, shall we tuck in?" at the end of the lead paragraph.

C2. What is the purpose of the new 'Food Matters' page?

Part D: Discussion task

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Part D: Discussion task

"People who need medical treatment because of illnesses related to their unhealthy diet and lifestyle should have to pay for their own treatment." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons for your view.

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