

All about Food – in a Nutshell

Diet and nutrition plays a very important role in our health and our lives. It is estimated that 70-80% of today's diseases are related to our diet. From my personal experience, yoga if accompanied by a proper diet can work wonders. The problem is to figure out what is a "proper" diet since there are so many conflicting theories today. I personally have tried the recommendations of the 200 year old science of Natural Hygiene - and found it very useful. I would like to share these with you in brief - for further information on natural hygiene- which deals with how to attain and maintain superb health - you can visit www.transformationyoga.com.

The basic principle of natural hygiene is to eat as much of our food as possible in the way in which nature presented it to us - i.e. raw. We have to greatly increase our consumption of raw fruits and raw vegetables. The easiest way to do this is to make breakfast a "fruit meal" -i.e. you should have only fresh fruit for breakfast. If you feel hungry after a couple of hours, you can have a second fruit breakfast! I would also suggest eating a LARGE raw salad before lunch and before dinner. Try to make the salad half your meal. Besides carrots, cucumber and tomato - raw nuts, sprouts, and green leafy vegetables are valuable additions to the salad.

The physiology and anatomy of the human body seem to suggest that it is designed to function on a largely plant-based diet. Therefore animal products - ie non-vegetarian food like meat and eggs - should only form a small part of your diet, if at all. Milk, in the form in which it is available today, has ceased to be healthy. A surprising fact is that a large proportion of the world's adult population lack the enzymes (lactase and rennin) required to digest milk. Milk consumption by these people leads to a lot of problems which magically disappear when milk is eliminated from the diet. A 21 day experiment without milk will make things clear to you.

Consumption of animal products -including milk - is the single largest source of cholesterol in the diet. Excessive levels of cholesterol clog up our arteries, leading to blood pressure problems and eventually heart disease and several other problems. Animal products are typically high-calorie, high-cholesterol, and high-fat. Plant products are exactly the opposite, especially if eaten whole (unrefined) and unprocessed and are therefore very healthy. Note: People living on a pure vegan diet - consuming no animal products at all - run a small risk of Vitamin B-12 deficiency. To avoid this problem entirely we suggest including small quantities of fresh curd, buttermilk or cottage cheese (paneer) in your diet. These are easier to digest than milk.

The "refining and processing" of foods removes many valuable nutrients including fibre that performs multiple functions in our body. White bread, white rice, items made of refined flour (maida) should be avoided - rather have whole wheat bread, chapatis or rotis, unpolished (brown rice) instead. Processed foods - anything that comes in a can, jar, bottle or packet - usually also contain a cocktail of chemicals in the form of additives, colouring agent, flavouring agents, anti-oxidants, stabilisers, emulsifiers and what not. Read the label of any packaged food and you will know what I am talking about. Food with a label on it is better off on the shop shelf. Simple freshly prepared home cooked food is far better.

I need not talk about alcohol and tobacco in any and every form - since the problems created by them are known to all. Stimulants like tea and coffee are equally addictive and you are better off without them. Good substitutes are herbal tea -without milk and sugar, tender coconut water, or fresh fruit or vegetable juice.

Very small quantities of oil may be used while cooking, but liberal use of oil - especially used in deep-frying foods - is not a good idea. Steaming, baking, roasting and stir-frying use less oil and are healthier ways of cooking.

Sugar is another innocent looking but harmful substance. It finds its way into our diet in a hundred different ways - especially through processed food. Soft drinks for example, have six to eight teaspoonsful of sugar in them! Our sweet tooth should be satisfied by fresh fruits and dried fruits and not the usual "desserts" that we are accustomed to. I would also recommend going easy on the salt - to avoid blood

pressure and several other problems in life later on. A yogic diet should be "sattvic" - which means hot spices have no place - substitute them by milder ones.

Over-eating of the best of foods will take away a lot of the benefits - so do not overeat! Eat only when hungry - not for any other reason - and stop eating when you feel that you can still eat a bit more. Grandma was right - chew your food well, and eat slowly - not only will you get more nutrition from the food but it also avoids overeating. Try to eat your dinner at least a couple of hours before bedtime whenever possible - late night meals should be the exception rather than the rule.

The attitude of mind while eating is also of utmost importance. Avoid eating when upset, angry, or distressed - wait a while to calm down first. A respectful attitude towards the food, and those who made it available to you can be shown by eating it with your full attention - not while watching TV or reading. This will nourish you a great deal, as will a happy atmosphere at the dining table. Many religions have a tradition of saying Grace before meals - basically saying a small prayer and offering thanks for the food, offering it to God and then eating it as prasada. I highly commend this practice - try it out and you will be surprised at the effect!

For most people, implementing ALL the things mentioned above at one shot would be a difficult task. So just start with whatever you can do - today and move towards the ideal. If you can't ever do it all - don't worry. How much ever you can do will definitely give you rich dividends in terms of health. At whatever level you choose to be, don't expect to be able to follow it 100%. There may be slip-ups for even the most well-intentioned and determined people. Don't be too hard on yourself if you eat something "wrong" once in a while. It's what you do 80 or 90% of the time that harms your body - it can easily handle the 10% of exceptions. Finally, don't become a fanatic trying to implement this system. There's a lot more to life than food. Eat the best you can - and get on with your life!