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Four Cornerstones of Good Health – Diet Don'ts

In my last column I wrote about good food choices. Today I want to talk about the foods to avoid or limit in a healthy diet.

Caffeine

Caffeine addictions often start at an early age. We consume cocoa and chocolate bars as children, colas in our teens, and coffee and black tea as adults.

There's nothing wrong with a single cup of coffee in the morning but many people don't stop there. Caffeine is addictive and people often drink more and more to maintain the kick. People who are drinking a lot of coffee are pushing themselves – they're whipping a tired horse up a mountain - using the coffee to stimulate them and get them through the day but in effect becoming more tired.

Caffeine constricts the blood vessels, which can cause headaches. It heightens anxiety and irritability and increases insomnia. It is also a diuretic so you urinate more often and eliminate valuable vitamins and minerals. For women, caffeine has been associated with breast cysts and PMS symptoms.

So limit yourself to one cup a day and enjoy it. Try decaffeinated coffee and tea. One note of caution. If you choose to lower your high caffeine intake, go slowly in order to reduce the likelihood of headaches. Reduce your intake by half a cup a day until you're down to one cup.

Sugar

At the beginning of the last century each person consumed about 15 pounds of sugar per year. Today we're up to about 150 pounds per person per year.

Walk into a grocery store, a health food store or a drug store and notice how many feet of counter space are dedicated to sugar. It's truly amazing! Many people use sugar as an emotional pick-me-up on a bad day. The unfortunate thing it does make you feel better – for about half an hour. The mind and body forgets how tired and out of sorts sugar makes you feel two hours later.

Sugar is the primary ingredient in cookies, cakes, pie, and ice cream. Pasta and bread made from white flour act as simple sugars in the body. Even packaged foods in the health food store have excessive amounts of simple sugars like maple syrup and honey.

I watch marketing trends and my latest peeve is protein bars. I think they've taken chocolate bars, added a lot of protein powder, and tripled the price. I haven't tasted one

that is not overly sweet. They do make you feel good but I wonder what the long term effect on the body will be.

There are plenty of problems with too much sugar. The pancreas is the organ that lowers the body's blood sugar level. Too much sugar wears it out and sets the stage for hypoglycemia and diabetes. Too much sugar makes PMS symptoms worse, it makes you tired, and causes mood swings. It will also make you gain weight. Unfortunately artificial sweeteners like aspartame are no solution. If you do choose to use nutrasweet or aspartame, then go on the Internet and research the devastating side effects. Created in laboratories from two amino acids these sweeteners break down into a common poison when ingested. I have treated patients whose only problem was too much nutrasweet in their diets.

Salt

We need salt to regulate the water balance in our cells but many Canadian palates have grown accustomed to too much salt. Excessive salt causes fluid retention and can lead to premenstrual bloating and breast tenderness. It can also accelerate the loss of calcium from our bodies. So use salt in moderation.

Fat

Saturated fats are found in meat, dairy, eggs, and poultry. If you consume a high fat diet, you increase your risk of heart disease, breast cancer, cysts and fibroids, and digestive complaints. Studies have shown that female meat eaters have 50 per cent more estrogen in their bodies than female vegetarians and estrogen is implicated in breast cancer.

People who eat margarine in order to avoid butter aren't necessarily home free. Margarine is made from hydrogenated oils that contain trans-fatty acids, which increase the risk of heart disease by raising the bad cholesterol (LDL). The solution is to consume a small amount of meat and butter. Remember – moderation.

Alcohol

A moderate amount of alcohol (four to five drinks a week) is fine. It can promote relaxation and be pleasurable. But many people drink more than this, thereby inviting alcohol's ill effects. The liver becomes overtaxed and can't do its job. It can worsen problems like heart disease, PMS, anxiety, and depression. It can also increase the risk of certain types of cancer.

To sum up, enjoy a diet that's full of whole grains, nuts, seeds, vegetables, and fruits with moderate amounts of protein and fat. Find new ways of treating yourself – have a massage, take a walk – don't make sugar and caffeine your only treats. Bon appetit!

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