Your daily diet: foods to include, foods to avoid

When it comes to Canadian eating habits, intentions seem to be good—but that's about as far as it goes. Although 85 per cent of us claim we are very interested in making the right food choices, only 40 per cent of us rate our eating habits as very good or excellent. But with so much conflicting information coming at us, many people aren't sure what good eating habits are.

The wider the variety of foods you eat, the better the chances that you're getting all the nutrients you need for good health. However, some foods have a clearly proven link to disease prevention, so it makes sense to try to eat them every day. Many people also find that following a list of foods to include every day is one of the simplest ways to ensure a balanced and healthy diet.

Canada's Food Guide is one of the best tools to help you plan healthy menus for you and your family. Here are some other great tips to make it easier to follow the guide and keep your eating habits on track.

Vary your foods

Variety is the spice of life—and the source of good health. Eating too much of any single food group can leave you feeling sluggish, so try to choose foods from each food group every day.

- **Eat three meals or more a day.** Skipping meals often leads to overeating or eating the wrong foods.
- **Try a vegetarian meal at least once a week.** Use grains, pasta, rice or beans to provide the foundation for a healthy, delicious, low-fat meal.
- **Experiment with foods from other cultures.** Many ethnic foods are based on ingredients that help to prevent ill health. Tofu, for example, is low in fat and cholesterol, and may help to ease uncomfortable symptoms of menopause. It's found in many Chinese dishes.
- **Dine lean when eating out.** Avoid fried foods, and ask for sauces and dressings on the side.
- **Choose snacks that are low in fat and high in nutrients.** Healthy snacks include dried or fresh fruit, raw vegetables, granola, vegetable or fruit juice, low-fat cheese or low-fat dips with crackers, nuts or trail mix.

Include healthy options

By adding healthy options into your daily diet, you can be sure to get all of the vitamins and minerals that your body needs to keep functioning well.

- **Eat five servings of fruits and vegetables daily.** Fruits and vegetables are high in vitamins, minerals and fibre, and low in fat. Some may also play a protective role in preventing certain types of cancer.
- **Consume foods high in complex carbohydrates.** These include breads, cereals, rice, pasta and some vegetables. They are all good sources of energy.
- **Consider foods high in fibre.** These include whole grains, fruits and vegetables, which may reduce the risk of certain cancers and help to control your cholesterol.
- **Include non-fat or low-fat dairy products.** These milk products will supply you with much-needed calcium without the extra fat. Calcium is important in the prevention of osteoporosis.

- **Meat products offer nutrients as well.** You have a choice from lean cuts of meat or chicken (without skin), fish or meat alternatives such as beans, lentils or eggs. Trim all visible fat off meat before cooking and limit sizes to three or four ounces.

- **Limit less-healthy options.** Certain foods may contain ingredients that, with excessive intake, can set you back from achieving a healthy state.

- **Salt.** Many prepared foods, cured foods and snack foods are high in salt. Excess salt may increase high blood pressure in some people.

- **Sugars.** Use these in moderation. Concentrated sugar found in candy, cookies and soda provides calories with little nutritional value and contributes to tooth decay.

- **Alcohol.** Moderate alcohol intake is acceptable, which may consist of two or fewer servings per day. Remember that alcohol can be a high source of calories. Pregnant women should avoid alcohol completely.

- **Fats.** Choose low- or non-fat foods whenever possible. Canada's Food Guide recommends that you limit your fat intake to no more than 30 per cent of your total caloric intake.

Smart thinking in the kitchen

Now that you know which foods to avoid and which to choose more often, here are some last-minute tips to help you with food preparation:

While there isn’t just one way to maintain healthy eating, the combination of tips suggested in this article should help you understand which foods to enjoy and which to avoid.

- **Read food labels.** Limit foods that provide more than three grams of fat per 100 calories. Also be alert for foods that are high in sodium or sugar.

- **Consider healthier cooking methods.** Cook foods by baking, broiling, steaming, poaching, roasting or microwaving, using little or no added fats.

- **Substitute with low-fat toppings.** Instead of butter, mayonnaise and salad dressings, substitute mustard, vinegar and salsas.