



Food variety: The spice of life

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"My diet is so boring ... I eat the same foods every day."

"The waitress at the cafe no longer asks me what I want for breakfast -- she knows I'll have black coffee, orange juice and a toasted bagel without cream cheese."

"Is it bad to eat the same foods day after day?"

Many athletes eat the same foods every day, day after day, for years. Their typical menu is based on bagels, turkey breast, pasta, chicken breast, frozen yogurt and pretzels.

This repetition keeps life simple, eliminates decisions, and feels safe -- safe from "getting fat" by eating foods with unknown calories, as well as safe from eating the "wrong food" that might contribute to digestive upset while exercising.

The benefits of eating a variety of foods

Some athletes are content with their self-described "boring diet." But if you eat a repetitive diet and wonder about the healthfulness of this pattern, you might want to think about the benefits of eating a variety of foods. Here's why:

You'll consume a wider variety of nutrients. For example, if your only fruit is apples, you'll fail to get the folic acid that's found in oranges. If your primary protein source is chicken breast, you'll miss out on the iron and zinc that's better found in beef.

You'll reduce the chances of getting excessive amounts of a food that might be harmful. For example, if the grapes you eat every day have a bad pesticide on them, you'll consume a higher dose than if you were to alternate grapes with bananas, oranges and kiwi. Or, if you eat several nutrient-fortified energy bars every day, you might get too much of one mineral, which could create an imbalance with other another mineral eaten in smaller amounts.

You'll reduce the need for supplements. Eating many types of foods makes it easier to consume more of the 600-plus known compounds that food offers -- including the 13 known vitamins and 22 essential minerals, and numerous other minerals, phytochemicals, fibers and health protectors found in whole foods. Whole foods offer more nutrients, and better absorbed nutrients, than pills. For example:

- The iron in meat is absorbed better than that in pills.
- The fiber in bran cereal is preferable to taking a fiber supplement or laxatives.
- Getting calcium from milk replaces the need for calcium supplements. Calcium aside, milk drinkers have a diet that's more nutrient dense overall than the diet of milk abstainers. Forget the story, "I don't drink milk, I take a calcium supplement instead." You fool only yourself by thinking a pill (or two or 20) can replace a variety of whole foods.

You'll enhance your overall health. Studies suggest that people who eat a wide variety of food groups tend to

be healthier and have a reduced risk of disease, including heart disease and diabetes. At each meal, you should plan to eat from at least three of these five foods groups:

1. Grain
2. Fruit
3. Vegetable
4. Meat, fish, poultry, nuts, beans and other protein-rich foods
5. Low-fat milk, yogurt, dairy and other calcium-rich foods

You should also eat different types of foods within each group. For example, by eating a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables (tomatoes, carrots, spinach, oranges, watermelon, blueberries), you'll consume a variety of the antioxidants that protect against the formation of cataracts in your eyes.

A tale of two diets

Because eating a variety of foods is so important, the nutrition professionals in Australia launched a food campaign to encourage Australians to eat 20 to 30 different foods a week. Currently, most Australians eat only 15 to 18 different foods. I'd dare say the same holds true in this country (if not fewer different foods)!

Let's count the number of foods typically eaten by two types of active people:

Diet profile #1: The weight-conscious exerciser

1. Oatmeal
2. Turkey breast
3. Pita bread
4. Lettuce
5. Tomato
6. Rice cakes
7. Apple
8. Energy bar
9. Yogurt
10. Grilled chicken
11. Sweet potato
12. Broccoli

Oops! That's only 12!

Diet profile #2: Junk-food junkie

1. Coffee
2. Big Mac
3. Coke
4. Chocolate-chip cookies
5. M&Ms
6. Pizza
7. Chinese fried rice
8. Ice cream
9. Potato chips
10. Beer

How many of these items even count towards "real" food?