

Food and Exercise: a Brief Review

Miles Hassell, M.D.

Most of us have in our own hands the most important tools for the prevention and treatment of heart disease, cancer, type 2 (adult onset) diabetes, stroke, dementia, osteoarthritis, obesity, and high blood pressure. These tools are good food and daily exercise – in partnership with adequate sleep, a powerful but under-appreciated factor.

The thoughtful use of each of these is the strongest predictor of good health for most people. The decisions we make about the food we eat and our exercise and sleep habits are more important than the decisions our physician will make.

Also, the impact of those decisions can reach well beyond the goal of risk reduction, and may actually help *reverse* disease. For example, someone who already has heart disease can reduce the risk of future events such as a heart attack by 70 percent or more with diet alone, and 60 percent or more with exercise. That's better than we see from our best drugs and medical procedures! And we find that the combination of conventional medicine added to food and exercise seems to give even better results.

Good food is whole food

Most whole, minimally processed food is good for you. The term 'whole food' comes up often in this book to describe food as close to its original form as possible, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, grains that are whole or at least partially intact (like steel cut oats or

cracked wheat), or animal products like eggs and fresh meat. Foods like butter and yogurt, which you can easily make at home, should be considered whole foods.

A few examples of minimally processed whole foods would be extra-virgin olive oil, whole grains, and cheese. (You will find more on these foods in the sections starting on page 13 and 16.)

Some of the foods we include in our recommendations for most people are considered controversial; for example, raw nuts, caffeine, dark chocolate, aged cheese, real butter, eggs, meat, and modest amounts of alcohol. However, the evidence shows that all of these appear to be relatively healthy *when eaten as part of a varied diet* that already includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains.

I tell my patients that any food commonly eaten for more than 150 years should be innocent until proven guilty, and any food created by man in the last 150 years is guilty until proven innocent.

The Mediterranean factor

The Mediterranean-style diet is the only dietary approach that has been associated with fewer heart attacks, less cancer, less diabetes, fewer strokes, and less dementia in large populations studied over long periods of time.

When compared head to head against low-fat diets, the Mediterranean-style diet is better than low-fat diets at controlling weight, cholesterol, blood sugar, insulin levels, and is associated with a 60 percent lower risk of cancer. *There is no other dietary lifestyle that can show evidence for these benefits.*

The mechanisms for the benefit of the Mediterranean diet are poorly understood. Some of the likely favorable effects seen in studies so far include a beneficial effect on insulin resistance and blood sugar, small improvements in cholesterol profiles, reduced homocysteine and inflammation, and higher antioxidant levels.