

Eat healthily, woman

Woman is at the heart of the family, playing the role of wife and mother. She must be well nourished before she can ensure good nutrition for her family members.

RECOGNISING the central role that a woman plays in the family, the society and the nation, the national level recognition of Women's Day for 2007 was scheduled for August 25 2007. Their contribution is particularly significant in view of the 50th anniversary of the nation's independence.

With good health and well-being, a woman can continue to carry out her duty as a wife, mother, member of the community and citizen. Good nutrition is imperative to enable her to contribute to her family and to her nation.

Indeed, women determine not only the nutrition they receive, but the nutrition their families receive as well.

Nutritional needs of women deserve special attention

Good nutrition is the most essential building block to good health and well-being. This is especially true for women.

Unlike men, women's bodies undergo changes as they go through major life stages – the most dramatic of which is pregnancy and lactation.

Their nutritional needs also change to meet the demands of these physiological changes and to protect themselves from the health risks that come with each life stage.

Women go through several life stages and each stage needs different nutritional requirements.

Adolescence: Certain nutrients become increasingly important as young women undergo puberty, which is marked by growth and development, as well as menstruation.

Pre-pregnancy: Women need to build sufficient maternal stores of nutrients to prepare their bodies for pregnancy.

Pregnancy: The nutrients women receive during pregnancy ensure their health and foetal growth and development.

These nutrients also enable them to go through the process of childbirth and lactation.

Lactation: Women who breast-feed need increased amounts of energy and appropriate nutrients to produce sufficient milk that is high in quality. This ensures the infant's health and well-being.

Menopause: Women are at higher risk of developing certain chronic diseases due to the hormonal changes they experience during this time.

Her nutrient needs at each main stage of life are different. Women need less energy, protein, zinc, niacin, vitamins B1, B2 and E, and iodine than men. Women show a greater need for iron than men.



Nutritional problems faced by women

Women around the world, regardless of their economic status, suffer from both extremes of malnutrition: under-nutrition and over-nutrition.

Under-nutrition can be caused by inadequate or imbalanced food intake resulting from ignorance or inappropriate dietary practices. It can be aggravated by infections and parasitic infestations.

It results in weight loss, growth failure and anaemia, as well as developmental problems, poor academic performance and low work productivity.

"Over-nutrition" is the result of inappropriate dietary patterns characterised by excessive intake of energy (particularly from fat, oils and sugars), which is accompanied by insufficient intake of fibre and lack of certain vitamins and minerals.

It results in obesity, hypertension, stroke, coronary heart diseases, diabetes mellitus (type 2), some forms of cancer, osteoarthritis and sleep disturbances.

Helping women meet nutritional needs

The solution to these problems is women's nutrition. Through good nutrition, a woman is able to prevent or minimise the risk of infections, nutrition-related disorders and chronic diseases.

The Woman@Heart Programme* has recommended a 7-step guide to good nutrition for women. This guide will help all women meet their daily nutritional requirements and avoid deficiencies and excesses that may lead to nutrition-related problems.

Widen Your Palate
Eat according to the Malaysian Food Guide Pyramid.

Enjoy a wide variety of food within each food group.

Watch Your Bathroom Scale

Maintain a healthy body weight. Being overweight or underweight puts you at risk of various health problems.

Make Smart Food Choices

Enjoy rice, cereal products, legumes, fruits and vegetables every day.

Go for unpolished or unrefined rice and cereals as they are richer in nutrients and fibre.

Incorporate legumes such as peas, beans and lentils into your diet.

Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables like dark green leafy veggies, carrots, tomatoes, mangoes and papaya that provide vitamins, minerals and fibre.

Cut Down On Fats

Choose low-fat and low-cholesterol foods.

Select lean cuts of meat and remove the fat and skin.

When cooking or eating, limit "visible" fats like margarine, butter, salad oils, cream and mayonnaise.

Fry foods with minimal oil, or steam, grill, roast, boil or stew instead.

Less Salt

Cut down on salted fish, salted eggs and salted veggies.

Limit processed meats such as sausages, luncheon meat and corned beef.

Minimise less nutritious, highly salted snacks like crisps, chips, preserved fruits and pickles.

Season food with spices, herbs and lemon instead of salt, soya sauce, oyster sauce, chilli sauce or tomato sauce.

Mind The Sugar

Learn to enjoy food and drinks with little or no sugar.

Limit cakes, traditional sweet kuih-muih and chocolates.

Drink plain water instead of sweetened drinks.

Eat fresh fruits instead of canned fruits or sweetened juices.

Water Really Matters

Your body loses fluid continuous-

ly during the day through sweating and urination. So don't wait until you feel thirsty to drink. Drink at least eight glasses a day to stay hydrated. Water can also come from milk, beverages, soups, fruits and vegetables

Nutritional needs during pregnancy

When a woman becomes pregnant, every bit of energy and nutrient that she takes in is channelled towards the developing new baby, enhancing her health and ensuring a smooth delivery.

Hence the nutritional needs of a pregnant woman increase markedly. The need for all nutrients increases, especially during the second and third trimesters. Dramatic increases are seen for energy, protein, vitamins B1, B2, B3, folate, vitamin A, vitamin C, vitamin E, calcium, iodine and zinc. The increased need for iron is so tremendous that it cannot be adequately met by normal diet alone. The requirements for essential fatty acids (alpha linolenic acid and linoleic acid) are increased to meet the needs of the developing foetus.

Pregnant women can meet most of their increased nutritional needs by consuming a variety of nutrient-dense foods. These foods will provide her and baby with much needed nutrients while ensuring sufficient weight gain throughout her pregnancy.

Good nutrition will also help alleviate common pregnancy problems such as morning sickness, heartburn and constipation. Pregnant women need to take extra care with their eating habits during this time as they are also preparing their bodies for the challenges of lactation.

However, this doesn't mean that she needs to make a total change of her eating habits or food portions (eating for two doesn't mean two bowls of rice instead of one!). The pregnant woman should still keep her mealtimes scheduled, relaxed and take healthy snacks if she feels hungry between meals. She should continue to eat according to the Malaysian Food Guide Pyramid and pay special attention to foods that contain the nutrients she and baby will now need.

Nutrition after birth and during lactation

Breast milk is best for baby. It is recommended that baby be exclusively breastfed for up to six months and maintained on breast milk up to two years or more, if possible. The nutrition a baby receives during the first six months of life strongly influences his health for the rest of his life.

It is therefore essential for mother to continue her diet of nutrient-dense foods by enjoying healthy meals and taking fluid regularly. A proper diet enhances the quantity and quality of the milk mother produces while keeping her in good health and providing her with the energy to care for baby.

All these benefits ultimately promote the growth and development of her baby. The need for most nutrients are high, especially during the first six months of lactation. The greatest increases are for energy, protein, vitamins B1, B2, B3, folate, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, zinc and iodine.



Restricting food intake to try to lose the pounds gained from pregnancy is not advisable. Breastfeeding naturally helps in reducing excess body weight gained during pregnancy.

Nutrition in the golden years

In the golden years, a woman would certainly want to take things easier, to do things that she could not find the time for when she was younger. She also wants to enjoy her food! All this is possible with good health and vitality. The key is a healthy diet and regular exercise throughout the golden years.

The nutritional needs of a 60-year-old woman are different from those of a 40-year-old. As a woman ages, she goes through a host of physiological, psychological and social changes. Her strength decreases, her immune system declines and her bodily functions become less efficient.

As a result, some of her nutritional needs may be different from when she was younger. There is an increased need for calcium, vitamin A and vitamin D while there is a decreased need for energy, protein, iodine and zinc.

A combination of good nutrition and regular physical activity is the secret to healthy ageing. Ageing women should be encouraged to enjoy a variety of nutritious foods. It is natural for ageing women to experience conditions such as chewing and swallowing difficulty, a poor appetite, reduced sense of taste or poor digestion. All these can be addressed and overcome with the right foods and practices.

* The Woman@Heart Programme, a collaboration of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, has published a series of four leaflets in English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil, providing practical notes and tips on healthy eating for women. These are available on the NSM website, www.nutriweb.org.my. Women & Nutrition - A Practical Guide for Healthcare Professionals, in both English and Bahasa Malaysia is also available on this website.

■ NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.