

Four Steps to Optimal Nutrition

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I know you've heard it said a million times, that old adage, "you are what you eat." And sadly, for the average American, what we've become is nutrient

deficient, chemical laden, and fat. As a result – no surprises here – obesity, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and a whole slew of other health challenges are rising at an alarming rate. So how do we get on the path to optimal health? By making a commitment to healthy eating, proper nutrition, and toxin reduction.

A healthy diet contains fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, along with a reasonable source of protein. In addition, the diet should be low in fat and refined sugars to support a strong immune system.

The first step in designing a healthy lifestyle and diet requires the elimination of prepackaged, over-processed convenience foods. These foods have been stripped of their nutrition – as much as 85 percent of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients are removed from ready-to-eat meals and snacks. What's more, they are packed full of chemical preservatives, flavor enhancers, and artificial dyes.

Instead, choose organic fresh foods, whole foods, live foods. The closer food is to its original, unadulterated state, the higher the nutritional content. New research is now showing what many of us have known for

years – organic products, ounce for ounce, deliver more and better nutrition than their "conventional" counterparts.

As important as what you're *getting* from organic foods is what you are *not* getting – chemical pesticides and fertilizers, artificial dyes and preservatives, animal growth hormones, and antibiotics. Testing reveals that conventional fruits and vegetables routinely carry residues from three to five different chemical pesticides and fertilizers. While chemical manufacturers and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) try to assure the masses that each chemical is present in "safe" levels, no effort has been made to evaluate the effects of consuming the chemical cocktails that end up on and in our food by the time it reaches the marketplace.

Step two: Augment your healthy eating with supplements. Let's face it; despite our best efforts, we may not get all the nutrients our bodies need through diet alone. Most Americans struggle to eat all the daily recommended servings of fruits and vegetables. Supplements not only add what nutritionally may be missing from our diets; they also can aid in digestion and absorption of the nutrients we consume.

Many magazines and websites are filled with one-pill-fits-all supplement solutions, but for optimal results, a customized regimen is best. A qualified professional trained to take many important factors into account, including normal diet, stress factors, age, weight, activity and anxiety levels, exposure to toxins, and overall health will best determine your nutritional supplement needs. Since all of these factors can change, it is important to

routinely reevaluate your needs and make any necessary adjustments.

Step three: Minimize your body's toxic burden. In our post-industrialized world, society as a whole seems to have embraced the "better living through chemistry" mentality. At home, work, and play, we are surrounded by a host of chemicals that we use with reckless abandon. Americans spend over \$1 billion each year on chemical cleaners. Billions more are spent on indoor and outdoor pesticides. Now add in chemical air fresheners, perfumes, makeup, and other personal hygiene products, and you begin to see just how pervasive this problem has become. The chemicals in these products are not only polluting our bodies; they are polluting our environment. Fortunately, the selection of non-chemical or green alternatives is growing, and many are now available through mainstream retailers.

Yet, despite our best efforts to keep steer clear of toxins, exposures are a sad, unavoidable fact of modern life. Heavy metals, industrial chemicals – even banned substances like DDT – are ever-present in our air, water, soil, and food supplies. These toxins can accumulate in our bodies and impact our mental and physical health and well-being. Relieving the body of any toxic burden allows our cells, tissues, and organs to heal and return to a natural state of optimal health.

For a fourth and final step, I encourage everyone to "think global and buy local." Local foods, especially fruits and vegetables, not only taste better; they have higher quality nutrients. Local and organic foods do more than help provide a healthier diet;

they also contribute to a healthier environment. Organic farming reduces toxic runoff from pollutants that could contaminate our water, soil, and air. Buying local products reduces the amount of fossil fuels used in transport. This translates into reduced resource consumption and reduced air pollution. Also with less travel, products have a lower risk of contamination, spoilage, and other forms of waste.

The local farmer's market provides a great alternative to conventional grocery stores. A number of participating local farms are certified organic. There also are many local foods that are raised "naturally." This can mean that the farmer is using organic methods but has not yet been certified and therefore cannot, under U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidelines, use the term "organic" to describe their products. At a farmer's market, you can ask about farming methods and make informed choices that support your health and the health of our planet.

Dr. James H. Martin, director of the Nutrition Wellness Center here in Sarasota, is a Diplomate of Clinical Nutrition and Naturopath with over 32 years of professional experience. Dr. Martin is the current and founding director of the Natural Health Association, a national membership dedicated to increasing awareness of environmental toxins and promoting optimal health through natural healing and the adoption of environmentally sound lifestyle choices. For more information, call 941-371-1991.

