

Session 12a

Food myths buster



Are low-carbohydrate diets good for you?

Low-carbohydrate diets (for example the Atkins diet) usually involve cutting out most starchy foods.

Cutting out starchy foods, or any food group, can be bad for your health because you could be missing out on a range of nutrients. Low-carbohydrate diets tend to be high in fat, and eating a diet that is high in fat (especially saturated fat from foods such as meat, cheese, butter and cakes) could increase your chances of developing coronary heart disease.

These diets may also restrict the amount of fruit, vegetables and fibre you eat – all of which are vital for good health.

Rather than avoiding starchy foods, it's better to eat enough of them to make up about a third of your diet.

Food combining seems popular – does it work?

People who successfully lose weight on this type of diet seem to do so simply because their calorie intake is restricted. Food combining involves eating foods containing protein, fat and carbohydrate in very strict combinations and sequences. This sort of food combining bans high-calorie foods that contain a combination of fat and carbohydrates. It is also quite a restrictive diet so it's difficult to keep it up.

Do crash diets work?

Crash diets aren't good for your health and they don't work in the longer term. The way to reach a healthy weight – and stay there – is to change your lifestyle gradually. Aim to lose no more than 0.5 to 1kg (about 1 to 2lbs) a week, until you reach a healthy weight for your height.

What about foods with added plant stanols and sterols?

These foods are not routinely recommended but there is evidence that consistently eating 2g per day of plant 'sterols' and 'stanols' – which are added to some foods including spreads, soft cheeses and yoghurts – can reduce cholesterol. Studies have suggested that this could reduce LDL cholesterol levels by 10 to 15%, but the effect will vary between individuals.

The products may be helpful for people who can't take cholesterol-lowering drugs, or for those who still have high cholesterol levels even after making changes to their diet. They can also be taken with cholesterol-lowering drugs. However, these are not a replacement for cholesterol-lowering drugs nor are they a substitute for a healthy diet.

If you do decide to use these products, you should follow the manufacturer's instructions on how much to consume each day in order to get the 2g of the plant stanol. These products are not generally recommended for children under five, or for breastfeeding or pregnant women.

The most important things you can do to help keep your heart healthy and reduce your cholesterol levels are to eat a diet that's low in saturated fats and salt, have plenty of fruit and vegetables, and at least two portions of fish a week, one portion being oily fish.

Is salt substitute better than salt?

Reduced-sodium salt substitutes contain less sodium than standard salt and taste similar. But they are not sodium-free, so you will still be adding sodium to your food if you use these products. They also do not help you to get used to a less salty taste. So it's better to gradually reduce the amount of salt you eat. Salt

substitutes are also not suitable for some people – for example, anyone with kidney problems – so check with your doctor before using these products.

Is it bad to eat foods that are high in cholesterol?

There is some cholesterol in certain foods – for example, in eggs, liver and kidneys, and in seafood such as prawns. However, eating these foods does not usually make a great contribution to the level of cholesterol in your blood.

How many eggs can you eat a week?

There is no recommended limit on how many eggs people should eat. Eggs are a good choice as part of a healthy balanced diet. But remember that it's a good idea to eat as varied a diet as possible, so try to eat a variety of foods each week to get the wide range of nutrients you need.

If the label says 'low fat' or 'reduced fat' will the product always be a healthy choice?

To claim that a product is 'reduced fat' the amount of fat must be at least 30% lower than standard products. But these types of foods tend to be high in fat in the first place, so the 'reduced fat' version can still have quite high amounts of fat.

Foods labelled 'low fat' or 'reduced fat' aren't necessarily low in energy. The fat is often replaced by other ingredients, so the product can have the same or an even higher energy (calorie) content.

Also, if you're tempted to use more of a reduced-fat product than you would of the full-fat version, you might end up having the same, or even more, fat and energy.

Does margarine contain less fat than butter?

Butter and margarine contain different types of fat and it is better to replace the saturated fats that are found in butter, lard and ghee with unsaturated fats like olive, rapeseed and sunflower oils and spreads. But butter and margarine contain a similar amount of fat and all fats, whether they are saturated or unsaturated, contain the same amount of calories. So whatever fat you are using, remember to use it sparingly.

Is red meat always very high in fat and poultry always low in fat?

Removing visible fat can make a big difference to the fat content of meat. In fact, lean red meat is quite low in fat at 4-8g per 100g.

When the lean and fat components of meat are blended together in mince or meat products, the fat content can be much higher. Meat products, whether they've been made from red meat or poultry, can also be high in fat because of the other high-fat ingredients they contain, such as the pastry in a meat pie or pasty.

Skinned poultry meat only contains about 1-3g fat per 100g, and white meat contains less fat than darker meat. But if the skin and fatty deposits beneath it aren't removed, the fat content will be much higher. So try to go for leaner cuts, always remove the visible fat, and remove the skin.

Is dried fruit as healthy as fresh fruit?

As part of a healthy balanced diet, you need to eat at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables each day, whether they are fresh, frozen, canned, dried or juiced (but fruit juice only counts as a maximum of one portion a day). Dried fruit, such as currants, sultanas, raisins, dates and figs, provide energy in the form of sugar and are a good source of fibre. They also contain other vitamins and minerals, but not vitamin C, which is found in fresh fruit. A portion of dried fruit is one heaped tablespoon. This is less than a portion of fresh fruit because it's based on the equivalent weight, not the size, of fresh fruit. By losing water the fruit becomes more energy-dense and so it is much higher in energy than fresh fruit, making it important to limit the quantity eaten.

I've heard avocados aren't a healthy choice – is this true?

Avocados contain monounsaturated fat, which has a positive effect on blood cholesterol levels. As part of a healthy diet it's important to reduce the amount of saturated fat we eat and replace it with unsaturated fat, as well as reducing the total amount of fat we eat. This means avocados are a healthy choice. Half an avocado also counts as one of the five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables we should be eating each day. However, avocados do contain fat and eating too much of any food containing fat can lead to weight gain if the energy isn't used up through physical activity.

Is most of the salt in our diet added at the table?

Processed foods provide 75% of the salt in our diet. Just 10 to 15% comes from the salt we add when we're cooking or at the table.

On average we eat about 8.6g of salt a day. But we should try to cut this down to no more than 6g of salt a day for adults.