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## Balanced Diet

Has your doctor or nutritionist ever said, “All you have to do is eat a balanced diet”? You’ve probably heard that at some time, but exactly what does that mean? In reality, it’s not really balanced—that’s why the USDA uses a pyramid to depict it. The Food Guide Pyramid was created to provide a visual depiction of how we’re supposed to eat. The distribution of nutrients is 50 to 55% carbohydrates, 30% fat, and 15 to 20% protein. How can anything that unequal be called *balanced*? It really isn’t balanced in the classic sense of the word; what the pyramid approach attempts to do is provide a variety of foods so that people who follow it can get an adequate and balanced amount of nutrients.

For example, while it seems high in carbohydrates, the focus is on whole grains, vegetables, and fruits, while limiting sugars. If you were a careful observer, you might say, “Hey—this looks an awful lot like the DASH Diet!” The real difference is in the protein and fats: the DASH Diet limits fat to 20% and by doing that, the carbohydrates go up to 60% and the protein to 20%.

### So Which Approach Should I Use?

Let’s say that you don’t intend to get the genetic test done to determine how you should eat—you just want to pick one and go with it. How do you decide without the test? Here’s what I would do. Start with the foundation of vegetables and fruits: eight to ten servings of each per day. Start with that because none of us regularly consumes that much. You need the fiber. You need the phytonutrients. You just plain need them, so start with that.

The second step is to add the fats, and in this case, always go for quality—the more monounsaturated and polyunsaturated, the better. You’ll have to check the oils you use for cooking, the oils in salad dressings, and the oils that are found in prepared foods. You don’t have to strain to do it because here’s a simple strategy: no deep-fried foods. Period. No French fries, no potato chips, no deep-fried chicken, no taco shells.

All the process of frying does is add fat. An 8-ounce potato has about 200 calories. Turn it into French fries, and now it’s about 750 calories. Make that potato into potato chips, and you’ll be at about 1,200 calories. Almost anything that you deep-fat fry has many, many extra calories from the fat added in the process. Oil soaks into the batter covering the fish, for example, or oil adheres to the surface—the problem with the potato chips and fries is that cutting the potato into small pieces adds a lot of surface area.

An exception to the no-deep-fat-frying rule is deep-fried turkey; yes, oil adheres to the surface, but you’re going to remove the skin and thus the oil. And if you batter and deep fry a Snickers—which I admit I once did—you’d better cut it into bite-size pieces and share it with the whole family like we did. No one said you can’t have any fun—it all depends on portion control.

Finally, when you’re going to eat carbs, go for whole grains. If you’re on a low-carb, balanced, or high-carb diet, make sure you get the grains that are the least refined: buy whole grain bread, cook real oatmeal instead of pancakes, and eat the burger with a fork and no bun. From this point, all you have to decide is how many carbohydrates you eat to fit your plan. Remember that the fewer the carbohydrates, the higher the percentage of protein and fat you’ll eat, and that changes the balance.

## Weigh It

The last piece of advice on how to eat I'm going to give you is to weigh your food for a month or so, no matter which diet you're on. You won't have to do it forever, but it will help you be accurate. Here's an example. I took out the ingredients I was going to eat for breakfast: oatmeal, dates, and walnuts. I put the bowl on my digital scale, tared the weight of the bowl, and then started adding the ingredients. The oatmeal label said one-half cup uncooked was 140 calories at 39 grams. But when I put in one-half cup of loosely packed oatmeal flat to the top of a half-cup measuring cup, it was 52 grams. That would have been an additional 46 calories. The calories in the dates and walnuts were given only by weight, so that was easy. But more than a 10% error can really mess you up if you're trying to reduce your calories by 20%.

I also weighed a slice of bread I had the day before. The package said each slice was 53 grams and when I weighed it, it was 52, so that was right on. Yes, it takes time, but be patient and start weighing your food, especially the foods that have the most calories: 1 cup versus 2 cups of salad greens might be a difference of 5 calories, but the difference between a 6-ounce and 8-ounce potato is 50 calories. After a few weeks of this, you'll eventually get to the point where you can eyeball it, but if what you've been doing hasn't been working and you're not losing the weight you thought you should, take some time to weigh your food. You don't need a \$100 food scale—I use an inexpensive battery-operated postal scale, and it works just fine.

## The Bottom Line

Every strategy will work to help you lose weight if you really stick to it. Refining things as you go along will help you find the exact approach that works in your life. Remember, at the end of the day—or the year as the case may be—you have to find the way to eat that works for you for the rest of your life. Investing some time to do that makes sense to me.

What are you prepared to do today?

*Dr. Chet*

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