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Let your new year resolution be Healthy Eating

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Consumption of a healthy diet has been scientifically proven to reduce the risk of several diseases and to keep our body and mind healthy. This new year, we urge you to take a resolution to start eating a balanced healthy diet and sustain it for life. As seen in this image, a healthy eating pyramid consists of fresh vegetables and fruits at the base and treats and savouries at the top. Your daily meal plan should include 5-7 portions of dishes made of vegetables and fruits, 2-3 portions of whole grain dishes, 2-3 portions of healthy proteins and fats, 1-2 portions of dairy or plant-based milk products and a handful of mixed unsalted nuts and less than 1-2 servings of treats and savouries per week.

Here, I would like to share some of the food-related behaviour patterns I come across frequently and some simple solutions to help you acquire a heart-healthy eating habit.

Nutritional awareness categories

In terms of knowledge and application of healthy eating practices, the three categories of individuals we usually see are:

- Lack of awareness
- Aware and not applying
- Applying and not sustaining

During nutritional evaluation of our clients, we take a detailed dietary history. This is when we get to know their knowledge level about a balanced healthy diet along with their

ability to apply it in the daily meal planning and their adherence in the long term. People fail to include adequate amounts of fruits, vegetables and whole grains on a daily basis mainly because they are ignorant about the importance of a balanced diet. Moreover, they are likely to consume packaged foods and eat out very often, which makes things worse when it comes to behaviour modification. For those who are aware about the basics of healthy diet but find it challenging to actually prepare healthy meals and for those who are unable to sustain their efforts over a period of time, we provide targeted guidance and practical tips to incorporate the fundamentals of a heart-healthy balanced diet and adhere to it.

An entrepreneur in his 50s was recently operated for a heart attack and underwent a cardiac rehabilitation program with us. He quit smoking after the heart attack and his previously poorly controlled blood pressure had improved with medications, but his unhealthy dietary behaviour which included wafers, sweets, savouries and carbonated drinks and lacked vegetables and fruits was the most challenging risk factor to modify.

Simple dietary hacks

Fruits and vegetables are low in calories and are nutrient dense; in other words, they are packed with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fibre. Plain salads and plain steamed veggies can quickly become boring; there are

plenty of ways to add taste to your vegetable dishes. Some healthy cooking methods such as boiling, steaming, grilling, roasting, or pan frying enhances the taste of the vegetables. Naturally sweet vegetables such as carrots, beets, sweet potatoes and peppers add sweetness to your meals and reduce food cravings. Bringing in variety to your menu in the form of mixed vegetable soups or a stew, veggie gravy or a raita, vegetables cooked with dhal and garnished with shredded coconuts and peanut crumbs etc. would enhance the palatability of your dishes. Similarly, getting creative with your salads, experimenting with different combinations of fruits and going local when it comes to farm produce are ideal ways to spruce up your fibre intake.

Making the switch to a healthy diet

Switching to a healthy diet doesn't have to be complicated. You need not completely eliminate foods you enjoy, and you don't have to change everything overnight. A better approach is to make few small changes at a time. Keeping your goals simple will help achieve more in the long term without feeling overwhelmed by a major diet. Think of planning a healthy diet as a number of small, manageable steps like adding a salad to your diet once a day, reducing your intake of hidden salt present in packaged foods and cutting down added sugar, one change per week. Once these small changes become a habit, you can continue to add more healthy choices. When cutting back on unhealthy foods in your diet, it's important to replace them with healthy alternatives.

A healthy eating plan should include

- A variety of vegetables from all of the subgroups like dark green, red and

orange, legumes (beans and peas), starchy, and other leafy vegetables

- Fruits, especially whole fruits which are superior to fruit juices
- Whole grains instead of refined ones (e.g. whole grain bread instead of white bread)
- Fat-free or low-fat dairy, including low-fat milk, yogurt, cheese, and/or fortified soy beverages
- A variety of animal-based protein foods, including seafood, lean meats, poultry and eggs, and plant-based sources such as legumes (beans and peas), nuts, seeds, and soy products

Some tips to ensure a balanced wholesome diet

- Try at least one new healthy recipe per week
- Enjoy at least one meal every day with family / friends
- Eat a power-packed breakfast, for a healthy breakfast can jumpstart your metabolism
- Pack a healthy lunch with some add-ons like nuts and fruits for those long days at work, this lets you have more control over what you eat
- Try to finish dinner at least 2-3 hours before bedtime, remember to keep dinner light

Shortcuts might help you achieve temporary results, but focusing on sustainable healthy changes will help you maintain good health for decades. Feel free to take professional help if you are not sure where to start or how to help a loved one with nutritional challenges. After all, we are what we eat and eating healthy is an art that once learnt will go a long way in keeping you healthy and happy!