



Food as Medicine

Dr. Karen Benton, Naturopathic Physician

Often, one of the best services I can offer my patients is help them choose healthier foods rather than take a myriad of vitamins, supplements and medications. Given our cultural bias and media emphasis, it is no surprise people tend to believe the fallacy in taking more pills to create better health.

Some people end up taking a shopping bag full of “stuff.” Rarely do they calculate the cost and realize how much money they are spending on pills, capsules and powders. By taking some of the money spent on nutritional supplements, special drinks, herbal leaf extracts, etc., many people could spend a little more on their food and achieve longer term benefits in their health.

Why should I pay more attention to the foods I eat? *A balanced diet of whole foods contains the building blocks for the body to produce energy. Many people lack energy and feel fatigued because they are not choosing the right foods or are not able to metabolize the foods properly. The latter relies upon having the necessary bacteria, enzymes, proteins and metabolic co-factors. Compared to our ancestors, it is true we are eating much more processed and genetically modified foods grown in poorer soils. These foods tend to have less nutrient value and end up creating more waste for the body to eliminate. More metabolic waste tends to create more fatigue. However, in my opinion, whole foods are still one of the best ways to ensure proper metabolic balance and energy production. Choosing organic foods will reduce the body’s metabolic waste burden and drinking a sufficient amount of water will help the body eliminate.*

Are there really some “superfoods” that are more beneficial than others? Certainly there are foods which tend to contain a higher percentage of antioxidants, minerals, bioflavonoids, vitamins, protein, etc. Years ago, I researched many of the popular books which advocated the top foods for cancer and heart disease prevention. You can find as many lists as there are books and practitioners. Each author tends to view research from a particular point of view. *Because we live in the Pacific Northwest, my list would include the following: salmon, blueberries, kale, beets, garlic, peppers, hazelnuts (almonds), lentils, oats, broccoli, pumpkin and tomatoes.* The most nutrients are typically available from fresh foods, then frozen, then canned. In most fruits and vegetables, the darker the color the most “nutrient-dense” the food. Choosing a red pepper is a better choice than a green pepper. Choosing romaine lettuce is a better choice than iceberg lettuce. Some people have food sensitivities which will alter their best food choices.

Why choose whole foods instead of supplements? *In nature, most substances act “synergistically.” This means each of the pieces tends to work better when part of a whole—and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. When research is conducted, it is typically done on only one piece or chemical constituent. For example, the polyphenols and catechins in green tea have a variety of benefits. Research doses of constituents are often higher than what is practical in a typical diet. This tends to perpetuate another fallacy in the marketing of many nutraceuticals that if a “little is good” then “more is always better.”*

What is the value in supplements? *Supplements are often very valuable if there is an identified nutrient or co-factor deficiency, the digestive process is impaired, the nutrient absorption process is faulty or the body is weakened or stressed. However, in my opinion, they are not an effective substitute for making nutritionally sound food choices.*

If you have questions, seek out the advice of a trained health care practitioner to test, evaluate and recommend dietary food options and supplements for your own specialized health care needs. *Most adults can achieve some benefit from probiotics, multi-B vitamins, fish oil, and in this climate, Vitamin D and other minerals.* You may read more about how to evaluate supplements in the “Simple Steps to Wellness” resource section on my website.

What are some of the resources if I want to know more? There are many books and resources available. One of the best interactive internet sites on nutrition and supplementation is <http://www.whfoods.com/> Another site which has a vegetarian (as well as a political) focus is <http://www.pcrm.org/> You may find more nutrition links (and recipes) on my website.

Dr. Karen. Benton,ND is a licensed primary care physician in Washington who specializes in women's health and works with chronic illnesses. She has locations in Vancouver, Battle Ground and Ridgefield. Although she does not sell food she belongs to a local CSA and prescribes (and sells) vitamins, supplements and natural powders. Karen also offers monthly healthy cooking classes through the YMCA in Vancouver. <http://www.countrydoc.com>