

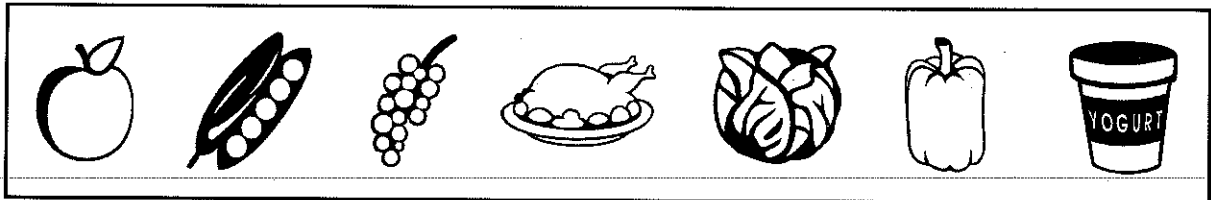
Chapter Ten

Eat Better — Feel Better

Overview

One way of looking after ourselves is to eat well. This chapter will:

- ♦ highlight why a good basic diet is important for managing chronic pain
- ♦ provide hints for good eating
- ♦ provide information about foods and beverages that may help chronic pain and those that may make pain worse.



Why Eat Well?

Although there is no such thing as a “chronic pain diet”, nutrition is an important part of the self-management process. In fact, a good balanced diet can help people with chronic pain in many ways.

A good basic diet is:

- ♦ important for general health and fitness; it helps us look, feel, and perform better
- ♦ helps us to control and maintain a healthy weight
- ♦ reduces fatigue and increases energy
- ♦ reduces constipation (which can aggravate back pain)
- ♦ lessens medication side effects (especially stomach and intestinal problems)
- ♦ reduces our risk of certain diseases (such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, some kinds of cancers, and osteoporosis).

Being a self-manager means being aware of those things you do every day that affect your health and well-being, and taking steps to make gradual changes that improve your health. The foods we choose to eat affect many aspects of how our body and mind function. A diet too high in fats, for example, is not only bad for our heart and circulatory system, but can also make us feel sluggish and tired. If we are already feeling a bit depressed from our chronic pain problem, a high fat diet is not going to help! The stress of dealing with a chronic health problem like chronic pain further increases our need to eat well.

Chapter 13: Healthy Eating in *Living a Healthy Life* provides the very latest thinking on the basics of a good diet. This chapter provides practical information on planning a healthy meal, how to read food labels so you know what you are buying, and addresses common problems with eating for health. The key message is to choose low-fat foods more often and to increase your intake of grain products and fresh fruits and vegetables.

Take the time to read chapter 13 and think about ways you could improve your diet, and even the diet of your whole family. You may want to make a self-management action plan in relation to eating for health. As with all action plans, start by making small changes to your current eating habits, rather than making big changes all at once.

Hints for Good Eating

Eating well does not mean that you have to starve yourself or totally eliminate the foods you love. Rather, it means making small, gradual changes in what you eat. By making small, gradual changes you are more likely to stick with them for good. You can start simply by reducing the fat, not by giving up all your favourite foods, but by switching to lower fat versions. Some practical hints for improving our food choices are:

1. Eat less red meat, more fish and poultry.

(Choose leaner cuts, trim off the fat from meat and chicken, and remove the skin of chicken. Turkey is a low-fat alternative.)

2. Choose low-fat or non-fat dairy products.

(For example, if you use whole milk, switch to 2%. Over the next few weeks switch to lower fat milk products.)

3. Limit fats and oils.

(Choose fried foods less often. Limit fats to no more than 3-4 teaspoons per day for cooking, baking, salads and spreads.)

4. Eat more whole grains, cereals, pasta, rice, dried peas and beans.

5. Eat seven to ten servings of fruit and vegetables per day.

6. Reduce salt or sodium intake.

(Substitute other seasonings or spices for flavour.)

7. Drink six to eight glasses of water per day.

8. Snack on fruit, raw vegetables or nonfat yogurt, not sweets, pastries or ice cream.

Foods and Beverages That Might Help Chronic Pain

The role of nutrition on pain is at a relatively early stage of research. However, preliminary findings from human pain studies suggest that some substances in foods may be helpful for those with acute and chronic pain by reducing inflammation, by increasing serotonin-like substances that improve our mood and reduce the sensation of pain, by modifying nerve membranes, or by other mechanisms that are not yet fully understood.

- ♦ **Omega-3 fatty acids** have been found to reduce recurrent migraine headache, inflammatory pain, pain of multiple sclerosis, and arthritis. Omega-3 is found in high quantities in the following foods: flaxseed, walnuts, chinook salmon (not farmed salmon), soybeans, halibut, shrimp, snapper, tofu, scallops, winter squash and a number of other foods.

- ♦ **Tryptophan** has been found to be beneficial for neuropathic pain and in improving sleep. Foods high in tryptophan include: milk, yogurt, cottage and parmesan cheese, sesame, sunflower, and pumpkin seeds, soy, chocolate, oats, bananas, mangoes, dried dates, meat, poultry and turkey, eggs, fish, and chick-peas.

- ♦ A diet high in **fibre** was found to reduce menstrual pain in women. A high fibre diet also aids in preventing constipation which may aggravate back pain or may be a side effect of some pain medications.

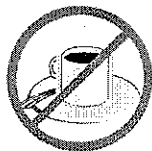
- ♦ **Soy-enriched** diets were found to reduce neuropathic pain.

- ♦ **Green tea and cherries** may possess pain-relieving properties.

If you decide to eat more of these foods to see if they help you, then plan your meals and snacks, incorporating these foods, using Chapter 13: Healthy Eating in *Living a Healthy Life* as a guide. The important thing is to have a balanced, varied and healthy diet.

Foods and Beverages That May Cause Problems

A last word about nutrition and chronic pain. Although there are no known foods which make chronic pain worse in all people, there is some evidence that certain foods or drinks may increase your sensation of pain. These are: caffeine, alcohol, monosodium glutamate, and aspartame.



Caffeine: People with chronic pain often drink lots of coffee and tea over the course of the day. Caffeine is also present in chocolate, cocoa, some soft drinks like colas, and in a number of drugs including analgesics (pain killers) and cold remedies. In some people, large amounts of caffeine may increase feelings of anxiety, restlessness and irritability, chest palpitations and stomach complaints. Some of these symptoms may further intensify your perception of pain.

The latest information suggests that about 2 cups/mugs of brewed coffee or 4 to 5 cups of tea (brewed 3 minutes) is enough caffeine for adults per day. If you

consume a lot of caffeine, try to decrease your caffeine intake gradually (over 2 to 3 weeks) by substituting decaffeinated teas, coffee, and caffeine-free drinks. Gradually increase the number of decaffeinated drinks you ingest while reducing the caffeinated drinks. Brewed decaffeinated coffee, for example, has 2 mg of caffeine per 6 oz cup compared to about 103 mg of caffeine in regular brewed coffee. Quite a difference!

Gradual reduction of your caffeine intake is important because you may develop symptoms of withdrawal if you reduce your caffeine intake too quickly. These symptoms include headache, fatigue, irritability and mood swings. If you reduce gradually, you should have no ill effects.



Alcohol: Alcohol may affect pain perception in a number of ways. First, it dilates blood vessels and can trigger painful conditions like migraine or other headaches. Secondly, alcohol is a depressant. The sedating effects of alcohol may initially seem to decrease pain but it can worsen pain once the effects wear off. Third, alcohol can interfere with sleep. And finally, alcohol can be habit forming. Heavy consumption of alcohol to relieve pain is a bad idea. Consuming too much alcohol will create many more problems for you and your family, while doing nothing to help you manage pain.

The latest research suggests that for most adults, moderate consumption of alcohol is 1 to 2 drinks per day with not more than 7 drinks for women and 14 drinks for men per week. However, Canadian guidelines on low-risk drinking state that certain people should not use alcohol or should limit their intake. These groups include people taking medications such as sedatives, sleeping tablets, and pain medications. If you are on these medications or if you suspect that alcohol may be a trigger for pain or impact on your ability to manage it, then stop drinking alcohol. If you have problems with alcohol consumption and drink to excess to numb pain, seek help. Your health care provider and community agencies can be of service to you.



MSG: MSG stands for monosodium glutamate. It is a flavour enhancer found in many prepared foods and is often in Chinese food. People sensitive to MSG can experience migraine, other headache, a burning sensation of the face, sweating and chest tightness. If you are sensitive, avoid MSG. Read food labels, and if you eat out in a Chinese restaurant, ask them to prepare your order without MSG. They are usually very obliging.



Aspartame: Aspartame (sometimes known as Nutrasweet) is a sweetener used in many diet drinks and products. In sensitive individuals, it can cause headache symptoms. If you eat or drink a lot of diet products, you may want to consider whether they might be contributing to your pain, especially head and neck pain.

Remember



- ◆ There are many benefits of a healthy diet.
- ◆ Think of ways you could gradually improve your eating habits.
- ◆ Consider whether caffeine, alcohol, MSG or aspartame may play a role in increasing your pain.
- ◆ There are many cookbooks that emphasize healthy eating. Look for those sponsored or endorsed by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, The Canadian Cancer Society, and the Canadian Diabetic Association.

To Read More About Eating Better



Kate Lorig, Halsted Holman, et al. (2007). *Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions*. Boulder, CO: Bull Publishing. (See the suggested further reading section in chapter 13, pp. 245-247).

Margaret Caudill (2002). *Managing Pain Before It Manages You*. New York: Guilford Press. (Chapter 7 “Nutrition and Pain” contains more information on good eating).

