

Good food? Bad food? I've Never Tried Either

By Steve Baldwin, MS, RD, Associate Editor

I have friends and family who obsess about it, and for others it's no big deal. Either way it's something that none of us can live without. Some types are held in high esteem, while others are bashed and beaten down, judged and rejected. Some people make a living by cooking it, some by serving it, and a lucky few get paid simply to taste it.

Of course I'm talking about the object of my own affection: food.

Food provides energy and building blocks for the body. It is a vehicle for the nutrients that keep our physical bodies healthy and our minds sharp – vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, proteins, fiber, and many others. But thankfully food is more than just a pile of nutrients. It's nurturing and nourishing. It's the way we express love to our families, the way we show we care. There's a reason that we gather together to eat – it's a time for bonding, togetherness, and sharing. Food is meant to be enjoyed, not judged.

Yet some foods do contribute more to a nutritious diet than others. In order to achieve health, balance is the key, for which a basic understanding of the facts can help. Knowing the facts can dispel guilt or worry that you aren't eating (or feeding your family) well. Consider these food facts as you navigate through your food and nutrition environment in the coming week:

Fact #1: Food is never good or bad...food just *is*. All foods provide nutrients that the body can use. When eaten in moderation, all foods can fit into a healthy diet. The cookie you ate last night did not ruin your diet, and it certainly does not make you a bad person. Strive to avoid judging foods and the people that eat them – including yourself.

Fact #2: Some foods, especially fruits and vegetables, do wonders for your body. They are packed with vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients that make your body work well. Other such foods include whole grains, lean meats, low-fat dairy, oils high in unsaturated fats (canola and olive oil are wonderful), and water. Dietitians refer to these foods as being nutrient dense – that is, they contain large amounts of health-promoting nutrients and not too many calories.

Fact #3: Eating meals as a family has tremendous benefits. Children who eat meals with their family have better social skills, get better grades, and go further in school. They are also less likely to use alcohol or drugs, and are less likely to engage in early sexual behavior than those who eat alone.

Fact #4: Food and activity go together. Ultimately the balance of energy intake – that is, energy in (calories from food and beverages) and energy out (how many calories we expend during the day) – will determine our body weight. But regular exercise has benefits regardless of body weight. Exercise helps relieve stress, and reduces risk for developing diabetes, high blood pressure, and some forms of cancer. It helps maintain healthy muscles, bones, and joints.

The next time you want a cookie, have a cookie. As part of a diet that is based on nutritious foods, a cookie is...well, just a cookie.

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