



Exercise and Diet

This document discusses food and exercises, contributed by the ABC dietitian;

What is a healthy diet?

When does exercise become compulsive exercise?

Exercise, how much how often?

Social Media and the promotion of fad diets

Breaking the bingeing cycle with diet

What is a healthy diet?

Contrary to what people may believe, the correct definition for a healthy diet is one that is unrestrained. Where a person chooses to eat foods from all the food groups and no one food or ingredient is demonised. A person who follows a healthy diet, may have a few days where they may eat cake, takeaways etc. and then several days when they eat wholegrains, lots of fruit, vegetables and lean proteins. There are no restrictions and there is no planning; if they fancy a biscuit, then that is what they will have. They do not eat the same foods on a daily basis; their choices fluctuate according to what they feel like eating.

Many people fear **carbohydrates**. This is usually because they have read or are bombarded with information in the media and social media that identifies carbohydrates as being bad for us. The reason why carbohydrates get a bad press is that it is easy to eat the less healthy types of carbohydrates to excess. However, including nutrient dense sources of carbohydrates such as whole grains, pasta, rice, sweet potatoes, potatoes, oats, beans/pulses, dairy, fruit and vegetables is necessary for the body to function correctly. These foods provide energy but also other key nutrients such as B Vitamins, fibre, calcium, zinc and iron.

Everybody is fearful of **sugar**. However, it is important to explain no food group should be demonised. Eating sugar to excess is not ideal but consuming a small amount even on a daily basis is not a problem.



I always try to encourage people to increase their **dairy** intake, especially if they are a low weight and have not been menstruating. Any female that misses 3 consecutive periods, will be putting their bone health at risk. The longer they go without periods, the more likely they will develop osteopenia and unaddressed can lead to osteoporosis.

Recommendations;

I usually suggest 3-4 servings a day where one serving is:

- 1/3 pint of milk
- match box size portion of cheddar
- 150g pot of yoghurt
- 100g pot of cottage cheese
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This will help to meet daily calcium requirements. They may also benefit from a high dose Vitamin D supplement. If a person is dairy intolerant then only soya will be the only suitable choice. Almond/hazelnut/oat/rice/hemp milk are very low in calories and protein so of absolutely no nutritional use what so ever.

Most people who are battling an eating disorder will be fearful of **fat**. They will avoid oils, butter, cream etc. Again, it is important to help them to understand that we all need some fat in our bodies and in our diet. Body fat stores are physiologically necessary for nerve contractions, cell membranes and most importantly for our brains to function. In additional a person needs to consume fat in order to facilitate the absorption of the fat-soluble vitamins; A, D, E and K.

When does exercise become compulsive exercise?

It is well known that *some* exercise is good for our physical and emotional health. However, this information is often interpreted in a different way by those who are struggling with an eating disorder when exercise can be used as a compensation for eating.

It is common for people to take up a sport or activity but for those with eating disorders this can escalate into a punishing daily routine, perhaps for several hours a day; they are driven by the belief that if they don't complete their routine, then they would not deserve to eat and by the fear that if they do not complete their exercise regime then something awful will happen. They will continue to pursue this schedule through tiredness and fatigue even when their body is screaming to stop.



It is important to remember that a body needs energy to benefit from exercise. When a 'well' body exercises, it uses the food that has been consumed to provide that energy, the body adapts to training by strengthening the muscles involved this enables achievement and progression within the given sport. When there is not enough energy this cannot happen. By exercising and restricting food intake the body must use existing energy stores; this includes the essential fat that surrounds and protects the vital organs. In addition, the body will break down existing muscle to provide energy.

In this instance exercise does not strengthen the body. Running or cycling or swimming without correct energy intake will not lead to skills improvement; often there will be a decline in times and speed. There is a risk that the person will see the lack of skill and stamina development as a sign that they are not doing enough and in response will push themselves harder.

Without sufficient fuel, the body will not be able to "spare" energy for the exercise. This is often why as an eating disorder progresses, even if the individual is doing excessive amounts of exercise, weight loss will be slowed. This is frustrating for the person who will try to restrict calories further and/or increase exercise to boost weight loss.

When a body is severely underweight it will not have enough energy, it will slow right down in order to preserve energy and keep the body alive. This is why a person with an eating disorder will feel cold all the time, will be unable to sleep, will have a low pulse and heart rate and will find it very difficult to concentrate or follow the thread of a conversation. The body is working so hard to stay alive it is trying to keep the heart pumping, lungs breathing and brain function to a degree, that there is no excess energy.

Exercise, how much? and how often?

Stopping exercise is hard, especially as we are constantly bombarded with messages about how we need to keep active. For individuals with a BMI of 17.5 or under, or for children with a weight for height ratio below 85%, all exercise and PE lessons should be stopped.

For those who are wishing to re-introduce exercise the following points must be applied: -

1. People wishing to exercise must be within the normal weight range as a minimum.
2. A moderate amount of exercise is something like 30-40 minutes 5 x week and includes activities such as walking, gardening, yoga and Pilates.
3. For more vigorous activities such as running or swimming, and classes such as spinning, body combat etc., aim for no more than 3 x 1 hour classes a week.



Social media and the promotion of fad diets

Many people who are battling an eating disorder work very hard to maintain their eating disorder behaviours in the belief that it keeps their life in control and keeps them safe and secure. People with an eating disorder make and keep many rules in order to keep the eating disorder in place. At ABC we often hear of individuals who say they have chosen to become vegetarian/vegan; eat raw; gluten free or paleo to name just a few. However in reality, this choice of diet is more likely to be because it makes it easier to remove certain foods/food groups.

It seems everyone has an opinion about nutrition and why shouldn't they? It's a free world! However, for every one of us who keeps their food choice and eating patterns personal, there are others who make it their business to "educate" as many people as possible.

Many of the health and fitness bloggers around have used their own journey. The pictures they post are often just a snap shot of a particular moment in time. It is likely they have taken this particular photo several times, from different angles in order to get it looking "perfect". They may also include some unsubstantiated facts, "pseudo- science" picked up from other bloggers they may appear convincing but they are not experts in nutrition. Following these bloggers and copying often their lifestyle is not recommended.

Wherever we look – the internet, social media, magazines, there seems to be an army of health, food and fitness bloggers all making nutritional claims to make us happier, leaner and bursting with energy. Many celebrities, personal trainers, chefs, are advocating the latest food fads. Over the years popular fads have been Kale juice, coconut oil, agave nectar; and also special diets; Gluten free, Paleo, sugar free to name just a few. Some people struggling with an eating disorder will use messages from social media, blogs, magazines, television and the internet whether relevant to them or not to consolidate their decisions around nutrition and exercise. It also makes them very fearful about what to eat.

It is important to ask;

- where do the advisors get their information?
- Who validates their advice?
- Are they qualified informed experts in this field?
- What are their qualifications and who regulates them?



Please remember that: -

A registered dietitian (RD) is the only nutrition practitioner legally allowed to provide nutritional advice for medical and clinical conditions such as eating disorders.

Breaking the Binging Circle with Diet

If a person is bingeing regularly then start by looking at what a typical day looks like. Are they eating sufficient amounts through the day? Or are they following the classic trap of restricting intake during the day to compensate for a binge the previous day, or planning for one? The irregular eating and bingeing leads to low blood sugar levels which in turn has a huge potential to trigger a binge.

Binge eating has a physiological element that is related to fluctuating sugar levels, but there will also be a huge emotional element. People will have set rules about their food intake that helps them to feel as if they are in control when their life feels chaotic. If they have failed and broken their rules, then there is a tendency for them to think "That's it! I've blown it now" and this can lead to a binge. People will binge to "push down" feelings of anxiety or stress.

When a person binges their body produces a higher concentration of insulin; this level will continue to be high in the hours after a binge so if a person over restricts to compensate, a higher insulin level will still be circulating around the body and this then causes real blood sugar lows, which in turn can then physiologically trigger a binge again.

One of the most useful ways to reduce bingeing is to establish a regular eating pattern every 3-4 hours aiming to base meals and snacks around a combination of food groups.