

Optimising healthy eating habits

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There's nothing quite like a (hopefully) once-in-a-lifetime experience of a global pandemic to focus our attention on the status of our health, and the preventative benefits of a healthy lifestyle. As rolling lockdowns have restricted our movements and options, and tightened our belts, we've had little choice but to adapt our shopping and exercise habits; and shift our cooking and eating patterns to meet the moment. Now, in the midst of a third wave, many South Africans across economic spectrums are thinking more about how and what we eat; and wondering if our eating habits can help to protect our health in the face of Covid.



As registered dietitian and president of Adsa (The Association for Dietetics in South Africa), Maria van der Merwe points out when it comes to preventative health, nutrition plays a bigger role than just immune support. “Good nutrition is essential for optimal health across our lifespans. Meeting our changing nutritional needs from infancy through childhood and the teen years, through our adulthood into older age can not only help to increase resilience but helps us to manage our weight, prevent nutritional deficiencies and the development of a range of chronic health conditions. If we do become ill, a balanced diet can help us fight acute health problems and aid in our recovery.”



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So, how is the pandemic shaping our views and habits when it comes to daily eating?

Registered dietitian Dr Nazeeia Sayed says: “Many South Africans are feeling the economic impacts of the pandemic such as rising food prices and reduced household incomes threatening their household’s food security. With tighter budgets, you can still find affordable, healthy foods and achieve balanced meals. Focusing on increasing your family’s intake of seasonal veg and fruits, whole-grain options like oats, as well as shifting to more plant protein sources such as beans and lentils in place of meat, will save money. Healthy eating is within reach. For instance, traditional foods such as samp and beans or dahl and rice are tasty, affordable meals that can be supercharged with some extra veg or a salad.”

Many middle-income South Africans have increased their focus on nutritional supplements and so-called ‘functional foods’. Sayed points out that: “With vitamins and minerals flying off the shelves, it’s important to note that there's no scientific

evidence that any particular food or nutritional supplement or diet can prevent Covid or any other infections. Your best move is to stick with the healthy eating guidelines and ensure your family is enjoying a variety of foods every day.”

But what are functional foods?

Van der Merwe explains: “Also known as nutraceuticals, functional foods contain particular ingredients that offer health benefits that extend beyond their nutritional value. For example, these ingredients may protect against disease, prevent nutrient deficiencies and promote proper growth and development. Some examples of functional foods include products enriched with vitamins, minerals, probiotics or fibre; with each of these ingredients having a specific function. However, by their nature, nutrient-rich whole-foods like fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and wholegrains can also be considered functional foods. For instance, whole-grains like oats and barley contain a type of fibre called beta glucan, which has been shown to reduce inflammation, enhance immune function and improve heart health. Similarly, fruits and vegetables are packed with antioxidants, which are beneficial compounds that help protect against disease. So, increasing your family’s access to functional foods in an affordable way is as simple as including more fresh vegetables and fruit, legumes and whole-grains in our daily meals.”

Should we make more home-cooking a keeper in this Covid world?

Most South Africans have cooked more at home over the past 18 months than ever before. Sayed says: “Home cooking is great for many different reasons! If you involve the family, especially your children, it is a time to learn more about the food you eat – where it comes from and what it contains. Home cooking inspires us to try new recipes, talk about healthy eating, and explore different global cuisines. This is important modelling for the younger generation and assists in them establishing better eating habits that can last a lifetime. Many of us have access to the internet and you can learn to cook from watching videos, even if you have not done so before.”

Van der Merwe agrees: “Cooking at home, from scratch, allows us to use unprocessed or minimally processed foods – foods in their natural state – as the basis of our meals. When we cook our own meals, we can determine how much fat, salt and sugar, if any, are added during meal preparation. Unprocessed foods are more often than not, affordable ‘functional foods’ – nutrient dense and good sources of vitamins, minerals and fibre.”



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What are the top dietitian tips for getting more preventative nutrition benefits on a tighter budget?

- Focus on eating a variety of affordable foods so that you consume a wider spectrum of beneficial nutrients
- Prioritise unprocessed foods, including seasonal vegetables and fruits, wholegrains, dried beans and lentils
- Eat less take-out meals which are often high in salt and fats, and allocate this budget to whole-foods you can prepare at home
- Replace drinks with added sugar including sodas, fruit, sports and energy drinks with lots of clean, safe water – you will be amazed at how much you will save on your food budget
- Reduce your meat intake by focusing on more plant-based eating. Inexpensive dried beans and lentils are tasty replacements in meat dishes, or they can be added as an extra ingredient to stretch out your meat-based meals
- If meat options are becoming too expensive, shift to other more affordable animal-based protein sources such as eggs, maas and yoghurt
- Plan your meals and plan your food shopping. Look out for price specials and discounts. Collaborate with your family, friends and neighbours so that you can collectively shop for cheaper bulk buying options.
- Grow your own – start a home or community veggie garden and increase your daily access to easy-to-grow veg such as spinach, kale and traditional greens such as marog, as well as onions, beans, beetroot, carrots and tomatoes

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