All Foods Fit

I hope you enjoy this collection debunking myths around some of the common types of foods that are frequently demonized in the media i.e. carbohydrates, fats, and sugar. Read it and then review it, if you are struggling with anxiety around a certain food. All foods can fit into a healthy diet, and you deserve to eat foods that you actually enjoy!

-Jennifer Rollin, MSW, LCSW-C, Eating Disorder Specialist

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Carbohydrates

1. Carbohydrates are the body's main energy source.

Carbohydrates are an important energy source for your body. Carbohydrates are actually the macronutrient that we need in the largest amounts. Additionally, it is recommended that carbohydrates supply 45-65% of our total daily energy needs.

Julie Seale, RD, of Seasoned Nutrition, explains, "Why avoid carbs? They are the primary source of energy for the body, plus they are in most foods...and they taste great! Avoiding carbs would limit many other nutrients."

Beth Rosen, MS, RD, CDN, Registered Dietitian/Owner of Goodness Gracious Living Nutrition says, "Carbohydrates contain essential nutrients that our bodies need to function each day. In fact, our brain's nutrient of choice is glucose which comes from carbohydrate intake."

"The body's main and preferred source of energy is carbohydrate. So, "cutting carbs" will come at a serious energy loss. People are often scared of carbohydrate-rich food because of past experience with it - they're afraid of overeating it because they've done it in the past. This is not about the food itself, though. This is a behavior that can be addressed by looking at the underlying issues that contribute to someone overeating/binging," Lauren Anton, MS, RD, Co-Chair of the Health at Every Size Special Interest Group of the Academy of Eating Disorders, explains.

Anton says, "Also, I've found in working with my clients that the more someone doesn't give him or herself full permission to have a particular food, the more they will disinhibit (read: overeat) when they encounter that food."

2. Carbohydrates can help to boost your mood.

"Carbs are needed to make serotonin, our hormone that helps us feel calm and relaxed, like our own natural "chill pill". If you like being in a good mood, make sure carbs are on your menu," says Rebecca Scritchfield, RDN, and author of the book Body Kindness.

Additionally, going on a "low carb diet" or "cutting carbs" can have negative implications in terms of one's physical and mental health.

Michelle Kuster, RD, LD, certified intuitive eating counselor, explains, "There's always a nutritional demon; carbs are currently the culprit. With a $60 billion diet industry, marketers think of creative ways to make people fear food. But carbohydrates are your bodies and brain's preferred source of fuel, and even a short time without them will lead to fatigue, headaches and irritability."

3. Carbohydrates add satisfaction and pleasure to the eating experience.

Food provides important fuel for the body, but it is also supposed to be a source of pleasure and enjoyment.

"Without carbs, meals tend to be less satisfying. Having a source of carbs with meals helps you stay full and happy for longer. Who doesn't want that?" says, Josée Sovinsky, a Non-Diet Dietitian.

Ultimately, you deserve to be able to nourish yourself with food and movement that you enjoy.

4. Restricting carbs can create a disordered relationship with food.

Cutting out carbs or going on a "low-carb diet" can trigger disordered eating or an eating disorder in individuals who are genetically predisposed.

Christy Harrison, MPH, RD, CDN, registered dietitian nutritionist, certified intuitive eating counselor, and host of Food Psych podcast, explains,

"Cutting out carbs is a great way to make yourself start bingeing on them. Because carbs are your body's primary fuel source, your brain is wired to seek them out if there's a shortage. Carbs are essential for keeping your blood sugar from dropping too low. If that happens (as it often does in a low-carb diet), your brain will actually send out neurotransmitters that drive you toward whatever high-carb foods are available. So people who attempt to cut carbs end up feeling out-of-control around those very foods, without realizing that this is actually their body's way of protecting them. To avoid this vicious cycle of restricting and bingeing on carbs, don't cut them out—instead, learn to trust your body around all foods."

Michelle Kuster, RD, LD, certified intuitive eating counselor, says, "Any time we over-emphasize one aspect of nutrition, we lose the big picture, which is that all foods can be enjoyed in a balanced diet, and avoiding foods typically leads to unintended consequences such as intrusive or obsessive thoughts about food."

Fats (aka essential fatty acids)

1. Fat helps us to absorb important vitamins.

Fats are not something that you need to fear, rather they play many important and beneficial roles in the body.

Rachel Wallace Hartley, RD, LD, CDE, of Avocado a Day Nutrition, explains, "Dietary fat plays critical biological roles in our body including the formation of neurotransmitters, hormones and allowing our body to absorb the fat soluble vitamins A, D, E and K."

Lindsay Krasna, RD, CDN, a registered dietitian and nutritionist says, "I always like reminding clients that all dietary fats help enhance the body's ability to absorb fat soluble vitamins. So you can get much more nutritional bang for your buck by eating say carrots with avocado, as opposed to eating the carrots alone."

Robyn Goldberg, RDN, CEDRD, discusses other benefits of having enough fat in your diet when she says, "Eating fat is necessary for temperature regulation. Eating dietary fat will provide our body with healthy hair, skin, and nails. One client said to me, that her hair doesn't look like the scarecrow anymore."

2. Fat can help to boost your mood and optimize brain function.

If you want to boost your brain-power and enhance your mood, it's critical that you make sure to get enough fat in your diet. Marci Evans, MS, CEDRD, LDN of Marci RD Nutrition says, "Getting enough fat in your diet is correlated with lower rates of anxiety and depression. Your brain is about 60% fat and eating enough of it is critical for your brain to work optimally. When you get enough fat at a meal it signals your gut to tell your brain to relax and that you're satisfied. This helps you think about food less so you can pay attention to other things."

Emily Tam, a registered dietitian, explains, "We need to consume fat to support brain health. Also, research has shown that full-fat dairy products are associated with a lower risk of developing metabolic syndrome."

3. Including enough fat can help you to feel full and satisfied.

Nutritionists agree that having adequate sources of dietary fat in your meals and snacks can help you to feel full and satisfied. "Fat helps keep you satiated since it digests more slowly. Perhaps most importantly, fat makes food taste delicious, making nutrient dense foods palatable and exciting to eat. Consider carrots slowly roasted and caramelized in olive oil versus plain carrot sticks, rich and creamy full fat yogurt versus fat free, or a salad drizzled with a bright and fresh dressing versus plain lettuce," explains Rachel Wallace Hartley, RD, LD, CDE, of Avocado a Day Nutrition.

Emily Fonnesbeck, RD, says, "Fats provide flavor and satisfaction in a meal, allowing us to leave the table without feeling preoccupied with food. Dietary fats are essential building blocks for hormones and neurotransmitters. In fact, they play vital roles in brain function, particularly for learning and memory. While there is a lot of discussion about good vs. bad fats, ALL fats have a role in these metabolic functions."

Lindsay Krasna, RD, CDN, says, "The main takeaway is that we can't demonize or tout one isolated nutrient for being "good" or "bad" (including fats) because nutrients don't work alone, they work together in synergy with the other nutrients in the food. This is also why having variety in our diets is so important!"

Marci Evans, sums it up best when she says, "Your food choices are not a reflection of your morality, value, or goodness. Healthy eating includes joy, pleasure, and connection. It's not all about nutrients."

Sugar

1. Quitting sugar can lead to an unhealthy and disordered relationship with food.

The nutritionists that I spoke with agreed that quitting sugar could lead to obsessive thinking and a disordered relationship with food. Further, the idea of sugar of being forbidden or "off limits" can create feelings of deprivation, which is a major trigger for subsequent binging and overeating.

Caitlin Croteau, Anti-Diet Dietitian and creator of Finding Body Freedom, explains, "Quitting sugar means yet again alienating specific foods. When we tell ourselves not to eat something, it leads to increased cravings and therefore at some point may lead to either a binge episode or an all around unhealthy relationship with it. Instead of quitting sugar, I'd recommend working on creating a healthy relationship with it."

Marsha Hudnall, MS, RD, CD, of Green Mountain at Fox Run says, "Forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest. If you really want to ramp up your sweet tooth, tell yourself you shouldn't eat sugar. You'll likely become obsessed with it."

Beth Rosen, MS, RD, CDN, Registered Dietitian, of Goodness Gracious Living Nutrition says, "Cutting out any food or food category is restricting. When we restrict, we trigger a hormone that causes us to crave that food we have deemed "bad." Our brains become obsessed with it and, eventually, when we eat it, we typically overeat it. This process only leaves us with a sense of failure and shame."

2. It provides your body with energy and can make food more pleasurable.

All foods can be part of a healthy diet. Food is fuel for our bodies, however it is also supposed to be pleasurable. Restricting certain foods can take away pleasure and satisfaction from the eating experience.

Josée Sovinsky, a Non-Diet Dietitian, explains, "There is no need to eliminate sugar from your life. In fact, not only is it important as a source of energy, it also makes food more pleasurable and satisfying by improving taste and texture."

Katie Grubiak, RDN, of Eating Disorder Therapy LA, says, "Why would you want to quit that which is a part of living happily & fully in the world? Carbohydrates (AKA Sugars) as well as Fats and Proteins are what the culinary arts are made of....what our body MUST be made of. We can't leave any one of those Macronutrients out if we are to find metabolic balance."

Grubiak goes on to explain that, "If refined sugar-eating feels out of control, how about diving into the sugar craving & finding out why it is calling us? There are gifts to allowing sweetness into our lives. However, food doesn't have to be our only source of sweetness. We can learn to allow more joy in and let go of control. The sweet tart at the end of the meal can come to be just what it is...sweet and joyful in the present moment."

3. Quitting sugar may negatively impact your social life and relationships.

Numerous studies have shown that people who have fulfilling relationships with loved ones live longer, have fewer health problems, and are happier. Quitting sugar can have detrimental effects on an individual's ability to attend certain social events, as well as their overall sense of connection with others.

Meghan Cichy, RDN, CEDRD, CD, Registered Dietitian at Creating Peace with Food, says,

"Health does not occur in a vacuum. It is complex and dynamic. Consider how eliminating sugar in your diet impacts your life outside of food. While it will certainly increase the amount of time and energy spent focusing on an external force for food choice (which arguably pulls us further away from intuitive eating), it will also impact the way in which we interact with others and our environment."

Cichy explains, "Restricting sugar may lead to restricting social interactions and further drive over-control that challenges our ability to meet our needs. Avoiding sugar in the name of "health" is not only unnecessary from a nutrition perspective, it is also potentially harmful from a social connection perspective, a vitally important component of health."

The Bottom Line

Having a "black and white" mentality surrounding food sets people up for disordered eating habits. Additionally, mental health is an important part of one's overall health. I think we can all agree that feeling guilt and anxiety about eating a dessert is not mentally healthy. For someone who is breaking free from the diet mentality or an eating disorder, the healthiest thing for them may be to eat a brownie.

Instead of thinking in extremes, aim for balance, variety, and moderation in your eating experience. Work to let go of judgments of certain foods as being "good" or "bad," and instead choose to mindfully nourish yourself with food that you enjoy.

If you are struggling with this, it can be helpful to reach out to a therapist and registered dietitian who specializes in health at every size, the non-diet approach, and disordered eating/eating disorders.

After all, life is just too short for food rules, chronic dieting, and self-hate.