



HEALTH

Weighing a healthy diet



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Eating well could be a big step toward feeling well.

by Matt Alderton

Your mother was right: You really are what you eat—especially if you have multiple sclerosis, which could be helped or hindered by your diet.

“While at this point we don’t have evidence that any diet out there can cure or prevent MS, good nutrition is still important for people with MS because it can lower the risk of developing other diseases and disorders,” explains Holly Prehn, a registered dietitian at UCHealth, an Aurora, Colorado-based health care system. UCHealth is working with the Rocky Mountain MS Center’s Wellness Pilot Program, which promotes whole-body and lifestyle wellness in people with MS. “Vascular disease risk factors such as obesity, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, heart disease and diabetes are common in people with MS and may have negative effects on disability progression in MS,” Prehn says. “Following a healthy diet can help reduce the risk of developing these vascular disease risk factors.”

Alongside the disease-modifying therapies, a healthy diet may also reduce the inflammation associated with some MS symptoms.

“We want to avoid putting anything in the body that could cause inflammation,” says Kristin Kirkpatrick, lead dietitian and manager of wellness nutrition services at the Cleveland Clinic Wellness Institute in Cleveland, Ohio. “It’s about trying to keep the body in a state of homeostasis as much as possible to avoid flare-ups and live a happy, normal life.”

What is a ‘healthy’ diet?

Some people with MS swear by the Swank diet, a strict low-fat diet proposed in 1948 by Roy L. Swank, MD, PhD, a neurologist who believed people with MS could slow the progression of their disease by avoiding saturated fat—from red meat and dairy, in particular.

Some people with MS are proponents of the Wahls Protocol. Conceived by Terry Wahls, MD, who was diagnosed with MS in 2000, the Wahls Protocol is a take on the Paleo diet that consists of foods that were consumed by ancient humans, such as meat, fish and leafy green vegetables, while avoiding foods that weren’t, such as dairy, grains and legumes.

Although devotees of both have reported positive results, neither diet has been sufficiently substantiated by scientific research. “We need more evidence, for sure,” Kirkpatrick says.

Eating well

Unlike some conditions—like cardiovascular disease, for which doctors may prescribe the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet—the absence of evidence means there is no specific diet “prescription” for MS. Both Prehn and Kirkpatrick, however, are advocates of the Mediterranean diet, which embraces the traditional eating patterns of countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

The Mediterranean diet has “consistently been demonstrated to provide a degree of protection against major chronic degenerative disease,” Prehn says. “While there is not one definition of a Mediterranean diet, the overall way of eating is characterized by a high intake of vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts and seeds, unrefined grains and olive oil; a moderate intake of fish; a low to moderate intake of poultry and dairy products, generally in the form of cheese and yogurt; [and] a low intake of red meat.”

The underlying idea is simple: Good food in, good health out.

“I like to think of food as fuel for what you want to do in your day,” Prehn says. “If you fuel your body well with healthful foods to provide you with energy and the vitamins and minerals that you need, then you can optimize how your body and mind function.”

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based writer and editor.

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