

Living Healthily is a Natural Instinct

Losing weight or dieting or keeping fit seem to be the most difficult things to do. But don't lose heart. If you keep in mind some of the following fundamental principles then it is actually quite straight forward.

The First Thing to remember about diet and fitness is that *It Takes Time*. There are no short cuts. If you are seriously ill or obese then supplements and medications or a dietary regime might get you to a point where the 'normal' rules apply.

It is vitally important to develop good eating habits. To do so requires training of your body and mind gradually over a period of time. A crash diet will get you slimmer or lighter, but it is unlikely to last.

And here's why. Our civilization is probably not more than 10,000 years old – more or less since agriculture was invented. Our bodies, however, are the product of approximately 2-5 *million* years of evolution. Our digestive system is designed primarily for a life of scarcity. It is in fact only over the last 100 years (or less) that humans have lived in such abundance. Primates have been around for around 60 million years (with the Great Apes appearing around 20 million years ago), and their digestive systems are designed almost entirely for plant matter. It is still a mystery why our brains evolved at such huge expense in terms of energy requirements (our brains use up a fifth of our entire body's resources); but one clue could be that being able to use tools to kill large animals enabled early humans to obtain more concentrated forms of nutrition (meat), which in turn may have led to a natural selection towards larger and more intelligent brains (as well as the capacity to digest meat).

The point is that, despite living in a modern world, we inhabit ancient bodies. In dietary terms, this means that our digestive systems work most efficiently when following a roughly 'caveman' diet. This consisted mostly of root vegetables, fruits & nuts, berries and, occasionally, meat.

We can survive for long periods of time with very little food. It seems that we even don't need great amounts of water – the Bushmen of the Kalahari survive on a cup of water a day!

However, our bodies are designed to go into emergency mode when starved of food. Our metabolism slows down, non-essential parts of our brain are put into suspension and we prepare for famine.

This means that as soon as food becomes available, it is stored as a priority (usually as fat) before the body is allowed to return to normal and the lights inside are switched back on again.

This is what will happen when you diet. Your body is likely to over-compensate when it can by slowing down and overeating.

The trick is therefore to sustain a level of balanced basic nutrition that resembles the scarcity of a cave man.

This isn't as difficult as it sounds. Your body is probably the most finely and automatically balanced machine in existence. It seeks out what it needs to maintain optimum efficiency. That is why you *don't need* supplements, despite what the adverts say about lost minerals and deficient diets. I say this even though one of my businesses is to grow food using mineral-enriched organic fertilisers! If your body needs a nutrient then you will develop a craving for any substance that has it.

So one rule of thumb is to eat whatever you feel like! Whenever you want. Train yourself to recognise when you are hungry and when you are full. Then eat whenever you are hungry and stop as soon as you are full.

If you are a parent then the worst thing you can do to your children is to insist they eat at prescribed times and to clear their plates! It's even all right to eat those sweets & candies before dinner, rather than eat them when you are already full. Physiologically, it is often better to have a light liquid-based breakfast (i. e. juice or fruits) and snack (on fruit or vegetables) until lunchtime than to have a 'good',

solid breakfast as the breakfast cereal companies would have us believe. Saying that, everyone's body is different. So if a big oily breakfast works for you than go with your stomach's desires rather than your head's.

However, here's the catch. Because of our modern lifestyles of overabundance, we have confused our bodies. Naturally, quick & easily digestible foods like sugars take preference over other foods because, in a world of scarcity, sugars are useful.

So you have to train your body to rely on its more basic instincts. The way to do that is to try as much as possible to eat unrefined (unprocessed) whole foods and to truly savour and enjoy the sensuous experience of eating.

That's about it!

Of course, it is never as simple as this, because we are surrounded by deliciously tempting fast foods. There is just so much mouth-watering food around that it is hard to be selective or to restrict one's intake.

A good trick is to develop your good habits *gradually*. That's why Rule No.1 is: **It Takes Time**. It is not possible (for the majority of us weak-willed individuals) to suddenly change to a 'healthy' lifestyle overnight. Our bodies don't work that way. Which is why tough New Year's resolutions fail after a week or two or three. There is a psychological aspect as well, in that any kind of denial is resisted or sabotaged. We thrive on treats and rewards; we become depressed and ineffective when punishing ourselves.

Our bodies need to be gradually trained to develop a taste for wholesome foods. The way to do this is to gradually replace an unhealthy food with a healthy one – and as much as possible to choose something that we relish.

Replace just one cup of coffee or glass of beer a day with fresh juice. Choose a juice you really enjoy. And for your 'unhealthy' food or drinks, go for taste and quality every time. A really good, strong coffee once or twice a day is better than mindlessly drinking many cups of caffeinated muck several times a day.

Buy a cheap juicer and start each day with a glass of juice. It's quite fun to experiment with different fruit and vegetable combinations.

Preparation

Preparation is an important tactic. The day before, make sure you've stocked up on a few fruits & vegetables. Prepare some ready-made vegetables (sliced carrots, cucumbers, celery sticks) that you keep in a bowl of water in the fridge or take in a tupperware container to work – and find a few dips that you enjoy (even if they are technically unhealthy). Humous, tahina, cottage cheese, etc. all make great dips – you can get them all from your local supermarket nowadays.

Preparing in advance is key if you want to overcome lethargy. Make sure the juicer is all ready and laid out the night before with your fruit & veges conveniently piled up in the fridge so that all you have to do is cut 'n juice in the morning.

Our lives today are all about convenience. So make it convenient to get into good eating habits. The thought of spending more than 2 minutes to peel a carrot and flavour it is enough to kill the habit. But if it's just a matter of opening the fridge door and picking out a sliver then you get to look forward to satisfying the munchies in this way.

And get into the habit now of always including a little bit of salad with every meal – even if it's just a single lettuce leaf. After a while, this becomes two lettuce leaves, then two lettuce leaves and a slice of pepper... And before you know it, you begin to prefer salad meals over a burger and chips.

Some things to avoid

Avoid sweeteners & diet drinks – these actually *enhance* the appetite! Use unrefined sugar if you have to. Get to like the taste.

Also avoid the low fat, ‘diet’ foods. These often have more sugar than regular full-fat versions. Your body needs fat. Your brain can’t function without it. Your cell membranes are ‘fat’. You cannot even move without the lubricating benefits of fat.

You will have heard about ‘good’ fats, the omega 3’s and 6’s. Rather than cutting down on your fat intake, start enjoying top-quality olive oil over your salads and in your cooking and on your (whole-grain) breads, and eat fatty fish like mackerel and salmon.

A good tip is to dip bread in a mix of cold-pressed virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Develop a taste for olive oils – they are as varied and as flavourful as fine wine.

As a principle, avoid anything that is in any way refined or processed. Or at least go for the ‘whole’ version. At first, whole foods taste a little strange if you are used to your corn flakes, croissants and white rice; but gradually (mix some brown rice in with your white rice, add a few bran flakes with your corn flakes...) you will begin to *prefer* the whole version for its superior taste and texture.

Some things to reward yourself with

Eat chocolate. There’s nothing wrong with chocolate as long as it’s high in cocoa (70%). Once you get the taste for good chocolate (or any top quality food), it is hard to go back to eating rubbish. I can’t stomach ordinary milk chocolate anymore.

Occasionally, pig yourself out at a scrumptious buffet – but only after fasting for the day. Begin to enjoy feeling hungry. It’s a wonderful sensation – you feel light and alert. And it enhances the enjoyment of eating. It is not necessary to fast excessively – just skip your lunchtime meal, avoid fast food snacks, drink water & juices and eat the occasional piece of fruit. The idea is to aim to feel sufficiently hungry to thoroughly enjoy your evening meal.

A slightly better habit to get into is – as in France – to enjoy a hearty lunch, but only have a light meal at night (or eat as early as possible in the evening) and only have water-based foods in the morning (i. e. juices, fruits or vegetables).

Part of the problem that we have in our modern lifestyle is that we don’t eat because we enjoy it: we eat because it has become a habit, often out of boredom, and we seldom actually *taste* our food or drink anymore. That’s why you must treat yourself all the time, with the highest quality, best-tasting food & drink you can afford.

Your body will thrive and, before you know it (a year passes by pretty quickly nowadays), you will be slimmer and healthier than you could have imagined – and without any particular wilful effort on your part.

Savour your food (NB)

Probably the most effective way of developing good eating habits naturally is simply to focus on the taste and savour your food. Most of us simply eat or drink without tasting. This is how we end up eating more: in order to continue the taste sensations.

Despite what I wrote above, you really can eat *whatever you like* if you follow this principle. You don’t need to eat or drink as much if you turn it into a sensuous experience. The ancient Chinese Tao advises people to “drink” their food, meaning that you should chew and savour your food until it becomes liquid in your mouth before swallowing.

You will enjoy whatever you drink if you *sip*, rather than drink. Wait until the liquid hits your tongue and *taste* it. This way, you will drink less. Drink beer or coffee or tea or juices as though you were drinking a rare wine. Few of us would drink a Chateau de Neuf Pape in the same way as we normally drink beer. But once you start *tasting* your food and drink, you will begin naturally to seek out the better quality food and enjoy the experience more, yet find that you are eating less yet more nutritionally than before.

In this way, you can indulge in the finest chocolates or coffees or even enjoy fast food burgers and other junk foods without unsettling your body; it frees you to enjoy whatever you like. Nothing is unhealthy, so long as whatever you eat, you actually taste...!

If you are feeling hungry...

Very often, people mistake thirst for hunger. When you are a little dehydrated, the feeling you have is similar to hunger. Try drinking plain water first before having anything to eat. And then eat a water-based fruit or vegetable like an apple or carrot. It fills you up, re-hydrates you, provides you with an ongoing supply of sugars and holds off the hunger pangs for a little while.

Some myths about diets

Your weight is not important. On the whole, your weight bears little resemblance to how fat you are. Muscle weighs more than fat and it burns fat. So a heavy person with a lot of muscle is often slimmer and healthier than a lighter person with a lot of fat.

And water is a relatively heavy substance. One litre weighs a kilogram! You should be drinking plenty of *plain* water. Coffee, alcohol, certain teas and colas (soft drinks) dehydrate you. Get into the habit of enjoying plain water – or at least alternate between your glass of beer and a glass of water when you are out partying (or networking).

So throw away your scales. They don't tell you anything useful.

Calories. Counting calories is counter productive. You interfere with your body's highly evolved intuitive instincts to eat what it needs, when it needs and how much. It's hard at first, but try to stop when you feel full. One way that might help is to go for the desserts when you've had enough to eat. That provides a signal to your brain that dinner is over. It's hard to go back for that second (or third) helping of spicy prawns when you've just been savouring that deliciously dark chocolate cake with a cup of espresso.

Atkins and other fad diets. Atkins works for the wrong reasons. A fascinating Danish study showed that people on a high protein diet felt less hungry than those on a high carbohydrate diet. Atkins has worked for some people; but – as I mentioned previously – only in the short term. Your body *needs* carbohydrates as much as it needs proteins. Your body will get what it needs if you learn to trust in your cravings.

The principle to remember here is to aim for unrefined, unprocessed, whole foods. Pasta, cheese, beer, wine, bread (even chocolate) are all processed foods. It took me months to wean myself off my favourite staple: pasta in cheese sauce. Now I enjoy it occasionally, but it doesn't have the same appeal as it used to anymore.

If you need your pasta, start replacing it with the wholegrain varieties. Next time order brown or red rice with your meal – you'll be surprised how much tastier it can be. Or if you don't yet have a palate for the nuttier taste of brown rice, mix a little bit in with your white rice – and over time, increase the proportion of brown over white. You could also try mixing in small quantities of wild black rice to add flavour. Same principle applies to your bread – splash out on freshly baked wholegrain bread from a delicatessen or wholefood section of your local supermarket. Avoid the sliced packaged loaves.

If you like your cheese, then start buying smaller quantities of the more expensive varieties. And start replacing cheese with cold-pressed olive oil, for instance, in your sandwiches or pasta dishes. If you

like pizza then develop a taste for the genuine Italian version: very thin, crispy base with oodles of vegetable toppings. Find a genuine Italian pizza restaurant. Avoid Pizza Hut or The Pizza Company!

As for burgers, go for the meat and always include a side order of salad. In general, get into the habit of always having salad with every meal and gradually increase the proportion of vegetables over time. I used to be a big meat eater – now I tend to eat meat more as a condiment to a salad or vegetable meal.

Alcohol is a difficult one. It's nice to get tipsy – some like to get regularly pissed! It is one of the most concentrated, highly refined foods on the planet – which is why alcoholics can survive without eating anything at all. One approach might be to always go for the highest quality, most expensive drinks and to savour them. Perhaps reduce the amount of beer you drink by developing a taste for the expensive malts or spirits. Use the replacement technique to replace a jug of beer with a glass of Scottish or Irish brandy. And remember to alternate with glasses of water or fresh juice.

Alkaline-forming foods. I used to believe that this was important. Well, it's bunk! Your body is an extraordinary self-regulating and auto-balancing machine. Alkaline-forming foods are those that become alkaline in your urine. That's all. They in no way affect the alkalinity of your blood or of the cells in your body. Your body will maintain the correct acidity or alkalinity required to within very tight parameters – regardless of what you eat.

Organic food, vitamin and nutrient supplements. The jury is still out on this, but there is very little 'good' evidence that your body can't extract what it needs from a balanced and varied diet. If you are ill then supplements seem to assist in the recovery process. Some foods may help to improve your mental alertness or sexual appetite, but probably only because we may have got into habits that sap our resources.

As for organic, the argument is that we will avoid being harmed by the chemicals in fertilisers. The truth is that little if any of these chemicals end up in our stomachs by the time the food has been prepared. Organic food grown using nutrient-rich organic fertilisers do, however, taste a lot better. And that is probably reason enough to go organic. Nevertheless, some organic foods are more organic than others. It doesn't always follow that organic food is any tastier than food grown using chemical fertilisers. If you can sample the food, go for taste every time, regardless of how it was grown.

Free radicals

A lot has been written and marketed about free radicals. Much of it is bunk. However, our modern lifestyle has exacerbated the problem. Oxygen on its own is a highly reactive, corrosive atom. Once combined with itself (O₂) or other atoms, as in water (H₂O), it becomes highly stable. Cells in our body break up oxygen molecules during the process of generating energy for the body. The theory is that excess oxygen atoms are released into the bloodstream, causing damage to other cells by reacting with the cell membranes.

There are many vitamins and supplements that are supposed to help 'mop up' these free radicals and reduce the damage caused. Ensuring a regular intake of vegetables in your diet does exactly the same thing.

Smoking

Smoking is something that causes a great deal of cell damage, so just give it up.

Saying that, I have come across one notion that it is not the smoke or nicotine that causes the most damage, but the cocktail of chemicals used in growing tobacco and in the cigarette itself. Organic tobacco smoked in a pipe is supposed to be not so harmful.

The verdict is open on this one...

Psychology and Fashion

Diet is as much about psychology and fashion as about nutrition. Susie Orbach wrote a book many years ago called "Fat is a Feminist Issue". Being fat (or big) is not necessarily a health issue. Nowadays, the fashion is to be slim 'n trim, but this does not necessarily make you attractive. Different people are attracted to different things. Men tend to worry about the size of their penises and their biceps, while woman seem to worry about the size of their breasts, bum or tummy. I myself prefer a woman who is slim with small breasts, but I have a friend who had a slim wife whom he would hardly touch except when she was in the latter stages of pregnancy, or breast-feeding. It's a wonder how the poor woman got pregnant in the first place! Similarly, I had a girlfriend who left me for a fatter, softer man because she complained that I was too hard & bony.

(I'm looking forward to any interesting comments on this point. I have some anecdotal evidence as to the various advantages and disadvantages of *size*.)

You will probably find it more helpful if you focus on having a healthy body rather than a fashionable figure.

Exercise

Our five million year old bodies are physiologically designed to be active. In fact, our blood circulation *depends* on it. Our hearts pump blood to the far extremities of the body, but the return path relies entirely on gravity for the blood returning from the head and *muscular activity* for the rest of the body. As you move about, the muscles squeeze the blood back up towards the heart, where it is pumped through to the lungs for re-oxygenation.

Being physically active somehow develops greater efficiencies in your body. Unfortunately, we live a chronically sedentary lifestyle. Optimal functioning of our body (from breathing and digesting to efficient circulation and waste processing) depends on muscle activity.

There are three key tactics to exercising effectively. The first is to do what you enjoy – for it's own sake. If you don't like jogging, or weight-lifting or aerobics then don't. Find something that is really fun and enjoyable, whether it's tango or salsa or horse-riding or fencing or surfing. Even sex is a great form of exercise. Just learn to keep going for an hour or so at a time!

I am like a beached whale after 3 minutes on a treadmill. With some great dance music or a long track with a good rhythm, I can usually manage a 30-minute run; but I can run after a ball in soccer, hockey or squash, like a headless chicken, for nearly two hours non-stop, and not feel particularly fatigued.

The second is to build up gradually. My teenage daughter is currently doing 200 sit-ups a day. I can barely manage ten! She built this up by starting – over six months ago - at 10 sit-ups a day. Then increasing this to 20, then 30, and so on.

The last is to prepare. Even when you have found your fun activity, it is very difficult to motivate yourself to get started if you have to spend time and effort gathering your gear and equipment together. In the UK, this was doubly difficult for me if it was cold and dark outside.

Nevertheless, if everything is packed and ready the night before, and you have arranged time and transportation beforehand, then it makes it that much easier to get up and go. And it always helps if you have a buddy with whom you've made arrangements, as it's far too easy to back out if you're alone.

Another very simple exercise habit to acquire is simply to tighten your stomach slightly and clench your pelvic area slightly (like holding in your pee). The key word is "slightly". If you do it whenever you think about it eventually becomes subconscious – and that small amount of muscle tension helps to tone your body in the long term.

Breathing

We need to breathe – often and deeply. Oxygen is required not only to ensure optimal metabolism, it is also required to remove waste. Our sedentary lifestyle is again to blame for an accumulation of waste in our bodies. We have a remarkable mechanism for dealing with excess waste that cannot be eliminated: by wrapping it in a protective envelope of fat!

Paying attention to your breathing is beneficial in many ways. It is calming and also helps to reflect on your life – especially if you do as part of meditation.

Walking, climbing stairs, dancing, being physically active, etc. will improve your breathing naturally. The correct way to breathe is to pull your diaphragm down using your belly muscles. Let your belly expand like a balloon and keep your chest and shoulders steady.

Attending a basic meditation course or retreat can work wonders and requires very little effort. 10 minutes meditation a day is sufficient – and you can do it in the taxi, on the train or as an effective way of resting and recharging at work.

Living for Ever

It is truly remarkable how long we live nowadays. Only 100 years ago, people didn't live much longer than 40 years. People now usually live well into their 80's and the number of people who live past 100 has risen dramatically.

Much of this has to do with better nutrition on the whole and medical intervention that makes many life-threatening diseases little more than a common cold (which, incidentally, was pretty deadly over a hundred years ago). Some remarkable research has shown that rats that are slightly underfed all their lives tend to live at least twice as long as normal. People who slightly starve themselves report that they feel more energetic as well as look and feel ten years younger.

Finally other research has shown that people who have an optimistic and positive outlook on life tend to live as much as 20 years longer than their cynical, complaining, malcontent contemporaries.

So, to live a long, healthy & energetic life and (as a side effect) in an optimally slim body – enjoy being hungry, eat well (by which I mean eat predominantly unrefined, unprocessed foods and don't forget those greens!) and smile and have a lot of fun.

And, yes, it is as simple as that! Live long and prosper....

Summary Principles

- *Eat what you want when you want.* Favour whole, unrefined, unprocessed foods, but don't deny yourself anything.
- *Taste! Savour your food & drink* – make it a sensuous experience. If you are going to eat that creamy chocolate cake then enjoy every mouthful to the max. Eat small quantities at a time, so that you can really savour the taste. Drink your food so that you extract every morsel of taste before swallowing.
- *Eat when you are hungry. Stop when you are full.* If you are not sure if you are full then stop for 10 minutes or so. You can always eat more later if you are still hungry.
- *Drink when you are thirsty.* You might be thirsty rather than hungry. Drink plain water, not coffee, tea, colas or beer. These don't quench your thirst, regardless of what the ads suggest.
- *Find an activity you love to do.* Exercise only works if you enjoy it for its own sake.
- *It Takes Time.* Any habit you develop or diet you adopt is only really effective if it works for life. Any diet that delivers results in a short time simply puts your body out of balance and you possibly see-saw to an even worse state than when you began. Allow yourself a year to establish lifetime tastes and habits. You should start noticing subtle changes within six months or so.