

In the Nutrition Lane

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Nutrition Know-how: There's a Way to Keep It Simple

Pick up almost any fashion or fitness magazine, and you're bound to find a comment about how difficult it is to know and practice good nutrition. Journalists love to blame the scientific and medical communities for changing their minds too often as to what makes a healthy diet. We are told that new research tends to reverse conventional (or last week's) wisdom, making it impossible for the average consumer to keep up, or to understand the complexities of feeding ourselves "right." And here's **the first misconception** about nutrition knowledge and practice, that there is indeed a stringent and fixed "right" way of eating. As a nutrition educator, I offer guidelines and an interpretation of current research as I understand it, but a way of eating that seems optimal for one individual doesn't necessarily work for another. We each have unique genetic, biochemical, hormonal, and even psychological characteristics that influence our nutritional needs. Diet books are famous for rigidity. Information is presented in black and white terms, foods are good or bad, healthy versus junk. This promotes a "dieter's mindset," all-or-none thinking that results in extreme behavior and frustration at a perceived lack of willpower. As soon as we label a food *forbidden*, it becomes eminently more desirable.

Misconception number two is that choosing the right diet is exclusively an academic pursuit, dictated by scientific *authorities*. The nutritionally savvy individual may use a product's nutrition label to determine an appropriate serving size based on the number of calories or grams of fat. This leaves out the influence of taste preference, mood, cost, habit, emotion, logistics, and a host of other non-scientific reasons for choosing the foods we eat. It denies our own body wisdom, the biofeedback that tells us, "I know it had 200 calories, but I am still hungry" or, "Yes, it tastes good, but it's really too sweet to eat it all." Most importantly, it leaves out consideration of the *joy* in our eating experiences. Good nutrition is largely about balancing what we know intellectually to be good for us with what we truly enjoy, what brings pleasure into our lives.

The third misconception about nutrition and food confusion is the degree to which medical consensus really changes. There are certainly new discoveries in all areas of science that discount prior beliefs, but in the field of nutrition, there are also a number of "truths" that have withstood scientific scrutiny. For example, who does not remember hearing that fruits and vegetables are good for you, fish is "brain food," whole grains are better than refined, and that whole natural foods are superior to highly processed foods?

A worthy nutrition goal is to work toward modifying taste preferences as we gain a better understanding of how foods work for us, using both academic information and our body's feedback. When we balance those sources of information, we are not so easily swayed by media hype about the latest nutrition research or diet book, and eating remains a joyous experience that doesn't seem so complicated.