

The Nutritional Challenges for Women

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Abstract

Men as well as women can have emotions that affect their food choices but women being more emotional are more vulnerable. Also women's relationship with food goes beyond personal or family responsibilities but now they are at a turning point in the history of their eating habits. They are eating differently than they were doing generation ago and are having more and more difficulty satisfying their nutritional needs. They are all going through a critical situations and have dietary problems everywhere. This paper deals with the Nutritional Challenges that women are facing now a days

KEYWORDS: Diet, Deficiencies, Relation with Food, Fear, New Priorities.

Despite the countless recommendations of innumerable diet books — women continue to lose their battle with fatty tissues.

They are at a turning point in the history of their eating habits. They are eating differently than they were doing generations ago and are having more and more difficulty satisfying their nutritional needs. Some of these women are needy but others are quite rich. They are all going through a critical situation and have dietary problems everywhere.

The two major surveys carried out in India by the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) of the National Institute of Nutrition in Hyderabad and by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare underline some nutritional problems in the diets of Indian Women. Among the most prevalent nutritional problems we see

1. Anaemia (due to deficiency of iron)
2. Osteoporosis, Arthritis and hip fractures (due to deficiency of calcium)
3. Goiter (due to deficiency of Iodine) specially in pregnancy.

Some of the missing foods:-

Today women are more exposed to the first generation of transformed, refined, diminished foods i.e. refined flours, hydrogenated fats, polished rices, fruit drinks instead of fruit juices and all this has drastically reduced the vitamin, mineral and the fibre content in their meals.

Some women chose to eat less food in order to loose few pounds or stabilise their weight. As portion size has decreased, the availability of less nourishing foods have increased. Our grand mothers and great grandmothers have never heard of potato chips or soft drinks or diet coke or pizza & burgers. They regularly ate real foods, rich in fibre and low in refined white sugar like jaggery, roasted bengal gram, whole wheat flour, gram flour and parboiled rice.

Food served on paper plates, gobbled down in three minutes on an uncomfortable chair cannot be called a real meal. A real meal can be prepared rapidly but food should be served at the table on a real plate with real utensils at a reasonable pace.

Problems that do not affect men:-

Men have a definite advantage over women. They have a simpler physiological life —no pregnancy, no Premenstrual Symptoms (PMS), no menopause. No need to adjust their menus to compensate for monthly iron losses. Men actually need 7% less iron than women during reproductive years. No need to increase their nutrient intake to ensure a healthy pregnancy or lactation period. No need to increase their calcium intake to face hormonal changes at menopause.

Even if a Husband's menu is exactly the same as that of his wife, he comes out the winner, Nutritionally speaking. Why? Because the men eats more food than his wife, an average of 700 extra calories per day and by doing so he gets more nutrients hence less likely to suffer nutritional deficiency. Their nutritional challenge is much less complex than that of women.

A Complex relationship with food

Eating is not just swallowing food. We eat for enjoyment, health, comfort, relief. But many of our food choices are more or less guided by our moods. Depending on our mood, we make healthy or poor food choices. Every woman knows that a fresh fruit is healthier than a piece of chocolate cake but some days she goes for the cake instead of the Papaya. Some women become so depressed that they refuse to eat. Other reacts to frustration by eating tons of unhealthy food.

Men as well as women can have emotions that affect their food choices, but women are more vulnerable because they are more emotional & more sensible to pain and disappointments of those around them. Also women's relationship with food goes beyond personal or family responsibilities. Since pre-historic times women have been responsible for food. Sometimes by growing and

producing it and at other times by simply buying and preparing it. If the man of the house refuses to cook, he is considered normal but if the women of the house does not enjoy or know how to cook, she is nor considered normal. Even if she hates to cook, she has not choice but to cook. Then by working emotionally and physically to feed others, she may be left with no energy or desire to feed herself adequately .

Most often a woman tries to please others and feed others as best as she can, often neglecting her own preferences and needs. She cooks to satisfy her husband's likes, to please her children or in-laws. When does she cook what she personally enjoys ?

I know many women who dream of having the cook in the kitchen but cannot afford it. Who really enjoy a meal when someone else has prepared it. These dreams or frustrations affect their daily food take and their nutritional status.

A women lives in constant ambiguity. Her culture gives her the entire responsibility for nourishment and judges her on the verstality of her cooking but at the same time wants her to have a slender waist and flat stomach. Industrialized society has created an obsession with thinness. It has developed a whole industry to combat obesity. The thinness industry perpetuates the problem. Weight loss clinics, diet books, liquid meals, spas, gyms and diet foods do everything possible to convince women that they should be uniformly skinny. They do nothing to help woman respect their own model of health and beauty.

So there are four major obstacles that block positive changes :-

1. Fear of gaining weight.
2. Eating on the run
3. Eating out, in restaurants or with friends
4. Eating alone.

Obviously the magnitude of the obstacle is different for each individual since age and social circumstances are variable. Most women, will however, be confronted with one or more of the obstacles at any point in their lives. Each woman should concentrate on the blocks that are relevant to her and pay special attention to the set of solutions that is proposed.

1. Fear of gaining weight —

Most women merely wish they looked like Aishwarya Rai or Kareena Kapoor. The wish may be understandable but it leads some women to adopt practices which are far from healthy. They react to just one message 'lose weight at any price'. To accelerate the process, they start skipping one or two meals a day and become nervous and aggressive. Feeling excessively hungry they become weaker and weaker. Some of the most frequent symptoms the strict dieters complain of are fatigue, nausea, diarrhoea, constipation, dizziness, dry

skin, hair loss, muscle cramps, anxiety, irritability and depression. The end result is not any better. Most of the times the weight loss is regained. The reason for this regaining of weight is that our bodies adapt very quickly to a reduction in calories. After just a few weeks, it becomes accustomed to burning fewer calories. When she goes back to her regular menu she will slowly regain the weight lost she because her metabolism will not have resumed its pre-diet rate of burning calories.

The gentle approach towards healthy food begins by developing a positive self image. All women have quality to be emphasized like healthy hair, sparkling eyes, beautiful smile etc. and all women have manual and social skills and human qualities which can be developed further. By establishing a list of your personal assets, you will be in a better position to estimate your overall value. Secondly, you should also try to increase your physical activity. Choose form of exercise that you enjoy, which fits into your schedule, start slowly, do not rush into anything. A 10 or 15 minutes walk after each meal gives good results without disrupting your daily routine. When it comes to food the gentle approach suggests the gradual addition of foods which offer more vitamins, dietary fibres and minerals. Over the weeks you will acquire new habits at your own pace and shape new relationships with healthy foods. Without any frustration, you can drop foods that contain nothing but sugar, salt and fat, and work towards improving the nutritive value of your menu, month by month.

Lack of time to eat :-

In the last century poet W.H.Davies wrote "what is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare.....!"

Women and more so working women today seem to have so little time-no time to breathe, to daydream or to sit and think. Time to eat does not even appear on their daily schedule. Extremely busy schedules have become the enemy of mealtimes. Having less time to cook is not a serious problem, but having no time to eat is alarming and I firmly believe that you can always find time to do what you really want to do'.

A strategy that gives you time

1. Choose healthy fast foods — Healthy fast foods do exist! They are the one that are ready to eat and are not highly processed. They can be divided into three categories -
 - a. Foods rich in protein — like cheese, cottage cheese, milk, curd, yoghurt, nuts & seeds, roasted gram, eggs, curd with sprouts, sprout chat with vegetables, salads, boiled legumes.
 - b. Fruits & vegetables — fresh fruits & vegetables, leafy greens, tomatoes, mix of fresh fruits & nuts, fresh fruit & vegetable juice.
 - c. Grain Products — brown bread, puffed rice, wheat, bhutta, oatmeal, daliya, semolina, missi roti etc.

Choose one food from category A and one food from category C and two foods from category B and this will give you a balanced meal.

2. Shop at appropriate time- Purchase fruits & vegetables from local carts or groceries on the phone or choose stores or shops having more counters for billing.
3. Encourage participation - Assign duties & ask for help. Team work takes less time and provides excellent support.
4. Simplify your needs - Chose simple methods of cooking, use time and energy saving devices, like quick daliya, Instant dhokla, sprout chat, bhel purl, fruits & milk shake.

3. Eating out —

Women are eating out more than ever before. Teenagers are becoming addicted to fast foods, women executives are invited to lunch or dinner, some are obliged to host business lunches, housewives are looking for a break from the kitchen and so on.

People tend to eat differently in restaurants than at home. While people are more concerned about their health at home, they tend to forget their priority list when they eat in restaurants. Even if certain healthy foods are offered, people still order the type of food that is not healthy.

If you eat out on a regular basis and you want to increase the vitamin, mineral and fibre content in your diet then;

1. Order fresh lime with soda, vegetable juice, buttermilk or jaljeera instead of a carbonated beverage.
2. Order an appetizer made with vegetables.
3. Do not skip whole-wheat bread eat it without butter.
4. avoid high protein or high fat appetizer e.g. kababs.
5. Give top priority to tandoori fish, boiled legumes and lentils, dishes made of cottage cheese, tandoori chicken and the always popular south Indian idli.

Living Alone

More people live alone today than ever before. Women who live alone may have chosen to do so or may have been forced into the situation as a result of separation, divorce or widowhood. The less agreeable this solitude is to an individual, the greater are its negative effects. One of the worst negative effects is the deterioration in eating habits. It seems that eating alone can be a greater problem than living alone.

A young woman used to eating with the family may not feel like eating when she moves out, An older woman who has spent her whole life looking after others may not feel like eating when she no longer has children or a husband to feed.

Women who live alone often forget the benefits they enjoy:

- They do not need to feed a hungry family as soon as they set foot in the door -a freedom many working mothers would envy.
- They can change their eating schedule at any time without having to consult everybody. They can replace a meal with a nutritious snack without having to listen to criticism.
- Women who live alone are free to participate in sports or take fitness classes whenever it suits them. They can take their own time to eat whatever they like. whenever they like and however they like it.
- Women programmed to please others often forgets to please themselves! Nevertheless, they are becoming better informed today and can make an effort to improve their menu.

Setting new priorities:-

Many women are not eating sufficient amounts of the following nutrients

- Not enough iron, calcium, magnesium, zinc. Etc.
- Not enough vitamin B6
- Not enough calories during pregnancy
- Not enough protein in poorly planned veg diets.
- Not enough dietary fibres

Four major priorities that will cover all these problems are

- To decrease bad fats intake & to choose better fats
- To increase the intake of iron rich foods and facilitate iron absorption.
- To increase the intake of calcium rich foods and facilitate calcium absorption
- To increase intake of magnesium rich foods and facilitate magnesium absorption.

When you readjust your intake of fat, iron, calcium & magnesium you will automatically be getting enough zinc, vitamin B6, fibre and every other nutrient required for your well being.

You need not to change everything in your diet first week. Think about it before you make modifications. Give your body and mind time to adjust. Avoid changes that can stress your whole being. Do it slowly but sincerely. It can take a year or so to improve your overall diet. Consider food as health investment and pick the food that give you the highest return. Foods loaded with sugar, salt and refined fats should not be on your list.

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