

Doctors' Voice

March/April 2013

Vegetarian diet – a fresh look

The key to obtaining health benefits from a vegetarian diet is good knowledge and planning.

Seven out of 10 Australians are now eating more plant-based foods, largely in the belief that eating less meat and more plant foods improves overall health – a belief that is now supported by evidence.

Health benefits

A vegetarian diet can confer health benefits such as decreased risk of chronic diseases (responsible for 63% of worldwide mortality). This finding coincided with new concerns about a correlation between a high red meat diet and colorectal cancer. Because most Australians eat more protein than they require, vegetarians who generally eat less protein still meet their nutritional requirements. A nutrient-rich diet containing a variety of plant foods will contribute adequate amounts of protein to the diet, provided energy intake is adequate.

Vegetarians are not at any greater risk of iron deficiency anaemia than non-vegetarians if they eat a varied, well balanced diet. People with low iron stores or higher physiological need for iron will tend to absorb more iron and excrete less.

Health concerns

The key to obtaining health benefits from a vegetarian diet is good knowledge and planning. Experimentation with a vegetarian diet frequently begins in teenage years when knowledge of food composition and nutrition is limited. This can result in elimination of the major protein groups and a failure to replace these with nutritious alternatives, resulting in poor choices of vegetarian meal plans which may then compromise health. Monitoring intake in young vegetarians will maximise health benefits.

Variations on a vegetarian diet

- VEGETARIAN: Does not consume meat, poultry, fish or seafood
- VEGAN: Does not consume any animal products or by-products
- SEMI-VEGETARIAN: Consumes dairy products, eggs, chicken and fish, but does not consume other animal flesh
- LACTO-OVO-VEGETARIAN (LOV): Does not consume meat, poultry, fish or seafood; does consume eggs and milk
- OVO-VEGETARIAN: Consumes eggs
- LACTO-VEGETARIAN: Consumes milk
- FLEXITARIAN: Eats fish occasionally
- VEGIVORE: Adds meat as a condiment

Reference: Medical Observer 18 September 2012.
<http://www.medicalobserver.com.au/news/vegetarian-diet--a-fresh-look?>

For further information visit: <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov>

Influenza vaccination

Influenza is a lot more serious than the common cold – it is a very contagious viral illness which is spread through the air from a cough or a sneeze. Symptoms are usually like a very severe cold with added muscle aches, fever and weakness. Most people get over the flu in a week or two but some people get complications which can require admission to hospital. In the most severe case it can even be life threatening.

The influenza vaccine is recommended and FREE for those who are:

- 65 years of age and over
- Pregnant women
- Indigenous people from 15 years of age
- Residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- All people from six months of age and over with conditions predisposing to severe influenza:
 - Heart disease
 - Chronic respiratory conditions
 - Other chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow-up or hospitalisations
 - Chronic neurological conditions
 - Impaired immunity
 - Long term aspirin therapy in children

Why do I need to have it every year?

The flu virus changes constantly and to make it effective so does the vaccine – the current vaccine protects you against the strain that is about to arrive as well as the swine flu which has been with us for some time now.

You cannot catch the flu from the vaccine, as it contains no living organisms – you may develop a slightly sore arm, a mild fever or some muscle aches which will soon pass. Your doctor will discuss possible side effects with you at the time of vaccination.

For further information make an appointment to see your doctor or visit:
www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation/fact-sheets

Doctors' Voice

Pain Management - adults

Pain is a very common condition. At any given time around one-third of Australians are in pain, with one in five reporting that their pain is constant. The incidence of pain rises as people get older and women are more likely to be in pain than men. Pain management strategies include pain-relieving medications, physical or occupational therapy and complementary therapies (eg acupuncture and massage). Studies suggest that a person's outlook and the way they emotionally cope with long term (chronic) pain can influence their quality of life. Counseling can help support you to manage the emotional and psychological effects of chronic pain. Understanding the causes of your pain can help reduce your fear and anxiety.

Causes of pain

Pain may be anything from a dull ache to a sharp stab and can range from mild to extreme in severity. It may be located in one part of the body or be widespread. Causes of pain in adults include medical conditions (such as cancer, arthritis and back problems), injuries and surgery. The most commonly reported pain is back pain. Pain involving the limbs, shoulder, neck and head is also common.

See your doctor if pain continues

Seven out of 10 people seek professional help for their pain, mostly from their doctor. For some people, the cause of the pain won't be found or there will be no available treatment for it. In other cases, the cause may be remedied but the associated pain lingers on. Always see your doctor for diagnosis and treatment of persistent pain.

How pain affects the body

There are two types of pain depending on how long a person has it. Acute pain is a normal response to tissue injury, which starts suddenly and is usually short lived. Chronic (ongoing) pain persists beyond the normal time of healing and generally lasts for longer than three months. The vast majority of people with chronic pain have it for more than a year. This type of pain is usually the result of injury, illness or other health problem. The cause is unknown in around one-third of cases.

The body's reaction to unrelieved pain includes:

- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Changes to blood gases, namely reduced oxygen and increased carbon dioxide
- Higher levels of stress hormones including cortisol and adrenaline
- Gastrointestinal problems such as slowed digestion
- Musculoskeletal problems such as tension and fatigue
- Emotional problems such as anxiety and depression

Pain relieving medicines

Medications available for the management of pain include:

- Paracetamol
 - Aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen – these medicines reduce inflammation (redness and swelling)
- (continued next column)

- Opioid drugs, such as codeine and morphine – these medicines treat moderate to severe pain
- Local anaesthetics

Choosing the right medicine

The right choice of medication for you will depend on your pain. Issues you need to discuss with your doctor include:

- The location, intensity and type of pain
- Any activities that ease the pain or make it worse
- The impact your pain has on your lifestyle, such as how it affects your appetite or quality of sleep

Your other medical conditions and the medicines you take can also determine which pain-relieving medication is right for you. You should discuss these with your doctor so that you choose the safest and most effective option.

Managing your medications effectively

Always follow instructions for taking your medications safely and effectively. By doing so, your pain is more likely to be well-managed, you are less likely to take larger doses of painkillers and you can reduce your risk of side effects.

Medications for chronic pain are best taken regularly. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if your medicines lose their ability to reduce your pain or are causing you other problems such as side effects. These are more likely to occur if you are taking pain-relieving medications for a long time.

People can lower their levels of felt pain by learning self-management skills, such as coping with depression and stress. Some studies have shown that medication can undermine the value of developing these skills. It is important to learn the skills you need to cope with your pain and not rely on medications alone to do this. Always be guided by your doctor to avoid making your pain worse.

For further information visit:
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au