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Women Specific Nutrition

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"Women are not small men." This line trends around social media and has a lot of validity as many women want to take steps to improve their health, but the general nutrition advice our male counterparts follow often neglects female-specific needs. We can't just do a simple calorie conversion to translate a man's dietary needs to our own! But how do we differ? And what are some simple ways to start meeting our requirements? Let's discuss foods and ideas to help you feel more empowered in your eating and meal choices.

Whole Grains

While carbs have become feared by many as of late – largely due to recent diet fads – the fact is, we *need* them for energy, fiber, and key nutrients. Opt for a variety of whole grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes as your carb sources to get the most nutrient 'bang for your buck.' These nutrient-dense foods are all good sources of fiber, which plays a vital role in reducing the risk for diseases which affect women like heart disease, irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, and colon cancer. Here are some easy swaps you can start making:

- Instead of throwing crunchy granola on top of your yogurt or overnight oats, go for some chia seeds! Not only will they pack a fiber punch with 10 grams per serving, but they'll also add more protein and omega-3 fatty acids. If you're looking for that hearty crunch, swap your granola for omega-3-rich nuts like walnuts or almonds.
- Love a savory, warm grain bowl? Substitute brown rice for quinoa to bump up the fiber content while getting some additional magnesium to meet the recommended 310-320 mg per day for women.
- While colorful, fresh pressed juices look refreshing post-workout or for an afternoon pick-me-up, you're better off grabbing a homemade green smoothie instead. The fiber from fruits and vegetables is lost in the juicing process – the pulp from your smoothie will still get you that fiber boost.
- Add a variety of beans and lentils to your soups, salads, and as a part of any meal to increase fiber and many of the micronutrients which are imperative in a woman's diet.

Micronutrients

Having a well-balanced diet is important no matter your gender, but there are specific micronutrients that women need more than our male counterparts. While supplements do play a vital role in ensuring we're hitting recommended nutrient intakes, it's always preferred to get them via whole foods. If that's not a realistic option for you, it's best to get your blood tested to understand exactly which supplement and dosage is right for you.

Calcium and Vitamin D

These two work together as a team to support bone health and prevent osteoporosis – a condition that disproportionately affects women. Vitamin D can also help promote immune health and reduce inflammation.

- To get both in one sitting, grab low-fat fortified milk! Cow's milk naturally contains calcium, but non-dairy options such as soy and almond milk are fortified with the calcium they lack. Both dairy and non-dairy varieties are then fortified with vitamin D.
- Choose dark leafy greens to get a plant-based dose of calcium. Note that calcium in veggies is absorbed less than that in animal foods, so you'll need to eat high volumes to hit your daily needs.
- Fish such as tuna and salmon are great sources of vitamin D. If you get canned salmon, opt for the version that contains soft, edible bones for an added source of calcium.

Iron

It's no secret that as women, we lose this mineral during our menstrual periods, which puts premenopausal women at risk for anemia. Iron needs are also especially high during pregnancy to supply adequate blood to the baby. Women need 50–100% more iron than men (15–20 mg per day vs 10 mg per day).

- If you're a meat-eater, add in lean red meats and seafood like mussels, sardines, and oysters. Unfortunately, poultry is relatively iron-poor, so try swapping out one serving of poultry a week with one of these options.
- Plant-based (non-heme) iron is not as easily absorbed by the body as that in animal foods (heme). But it is found in a wide variety of beans, dark leafy greens, and fortified whole grains. Pair these with vitamin C rich foods (like by giving your spinach salad a drizzle of lemon juice) to increase absorption.

Folate
This mineral is especially important during childbearing years to prevent neural tube defects and promote both a healthy birth weight and healthy growth.

- Opt for spinach or dark leafy greens to add to meals, salads, or smoothies. Grab an orange when choosing a fruit, and add in nuts and beans to snacks and meals.

Vitamin B12
This B vitamin plays a role in cell health and nervous system function. Inadequate B12 intake can lead to a lesser-known variety of anemia, which can make us feel weak and disoriented. If you're pregnant, over 50 years of age, or choose to follow a vegetarian or vegan diet, you are at a higher risk to fall short in this nutrient.

- If you follow an omnivorous diet, regularly have meals with eggs, poultry, or other animal-source foods, as plant-source foods lack this nutrient. Try mixing up your fish choices and get creative with flounder, herring, or sardines.
- For vegetarians and vegans, try adding nutritional yeast to recipes – it's rich in a wide variety of B-vitamins, including this one. Soy milk and fortified whole grain cereals also contain B12 nowadays. Since the best sources of this nutrient are from animal products, supplementation may be necessary.

Magnesium: Helps with mood symptoms, period pain, and hot flashes.

Water: Staying hydrated is important for all body processes including digestion and saliva production.

Antioxidants: Fight inflammation and neutralize free radicals, which can damage cellular health and DNA. They can also improve fertility for both men and women.

My top 10 favorite foods for optimal women's health!

1. **Whole grain oats**
   100% whole grain goodness, no added sugar or sodium; good source of beta glucan, a soluble fiber which may help lower LDL cholesterol, regulate blood sugar and help with appetite regulation. Oats are also a prebiotic. Prebiotics are foods (typically high in fiber) that act as food for the "good" bacteria in our gut. The gut is often called our "second brain" because studies suggest it has an influence on our mood and behavior. A healthy gut microbiome may also affect our appetite and weight and have a major impact on our immune system.
2. **Berries ("brainberries")**
   Blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries; fresh or frozen; high in flavonoids–plant compounds that may help lower your risk for dementia; rich in anthocyanins, a type of antioxidant that can decrease inflammation throughout the body and particularly in the brain.
3. **Dried plums or prunes**
   Rich in antioxidants; great source of soluble fiber which promotes regular bowel movements and contain sorbitol, a sugar alcohol with natural laxative effects. Despite their sweetness they do not cause large rises in blood sugar and insulin after eating and can be used to sweeten food naturally without "added sugar"; may help preserve bone mineral density and thus fewer fractures in postmenopausal women.

4. **Dark Green Leafy Vegetables**
   Such as spinach, kale, SwissChard, and romaine lettuce; high in vitamin K which can help protect bones from osteoporosis and help prevent inflammatory diseases; high in antioxidants and may be one of the best cancer-preventing foods as well as decrease the risk of heart disease; ideal for adding "volume" to your meal without a lot of calories or carbohydrates and can help you feel full and satisfied and maintain a healthy body weight.
5. **Walnuts and other nuts**
   Walnuts are an excellent healthy fat and are particularly high in the plant source of omega-3 fatty acids which are so important for brain health. Nuts also contain fiber and other prebiotic compounds that support the growth of healthy gut bacteria. All nuts, although "heart healthy", are not "weight friendly" and I believe portion control is key.
6. **Beans/Legumes**
   Lentils, garbanzos and kidney beans. Beans are a great source of fiber which is so important for gut and overall health. Most women do not get the recommended 25 grams each day. One half cup cooked lentils provides 7 grams of dietary fiber, 9 grams of plant based protein and they are an excellent source of B vitamins, iron, magnesium, potassium, and zinc.
7. **Fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, sardines and tuna**
   As women age, their estrogen levels decline which can put them at a higher risk for developing heart disease. Fish high in omega-3 fatty acids can help fight inflammation and may help prevent heart disease as well as slow cognitive decline. Omega 3 fatty acids may improve fertility, even in older women. Short-term treatment may also improve egg quality.
8. **Yogurt (plain or unsweetened, dairy or plant based)**
   A great source of protein, and a good source of calcium, magnesium and phosphorus – minerals essential for bone health. One of the most familiar sources of probiotics. Probiotics are foods or supplements that contain live microorganisms intended to maintain or improve the "good" bacteria (normal microflora) in the body. Yogurt with active bacteria cultures can help support the good bacteria that already live in your digestive system.
9. **Soybeans (also a legume)**
   Tofu, tempeh, edamame, dry roasted soybeans, soy milk (unsweetened); soybeans are one of the best sources of plant based protein. They are versatile, have a low glycemic index and are rich in fiber, antioxidants and phytochemicals. Evidence based studies do not link soy consumption with an increased risk of any cancer. Consistent findings from several population studies also demonstrate that there is no increased risk for breast cancer survivors who consume soy foods. Whether people who have hypothyroidism should avoid soy is a topic of debate! Like other foods that can interfere with thyroid medication, it's best to wait four hours to consume any products that contain soy. Dry roasted edamame is one of my favorite on the go snacks. With twice as much protein and fiber as nuts, a good source of unsaturated fat and crunch, they are both satiating and satisfying!
10. **Avocado**
    A great source of healthy, monounsaturated fat which can help you increase the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins, and help with blood sugar and appetite regulation The fat in avocados can help lower inflammation and nourish your skin, hair, and nails. Avocado's are actually a fruit, are high in dietary fiber and are a great source of many vitamins and minerals including folate, magnesium and potassium which are beneficial for heart and brain health as well as fetal development. Although they are a nutrient-dense addition, they do have a significant source of calories. A serving size is considered 1⁄3 of a medium fruit and has 80 calories, 8 grams of total fat and 3 grams of dietary fiber!