

Maintaining a Healthy Diet during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States

COVID-19

The COVID-19 (also commonly called coronavirus) pandemic is causing a lot of changes in the daily lives of people around the world. However, there are things that can be done to maintain a healthy lifestyle in these difficult times. First and foremost, everyone is encouraged to follow World Health Organization (WHO) and governmental advice to protect against COVID-19 infection and transmission. Physical distancing and good hygiene are the best protection for yourself and others against COVID-19. WHO guidance can be found here: www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novelcoronavirus-2019/advice-for-public

GOOD NUTRITION

Good nutrition is very important before during and after an infection. Infections take a toll on the body especially when these cause fever, the body needs extra energy and nutrients. Therefore, maintaining a healthy diet is very important during the COVID-19 pandemic. While no foods or dietary supplements can prevent COVID-19 infection, maintaining a healthy diet is an important part of supporting a strong immune system.

Countries that have implemented strict lockdown and physical distancing regulations, have also put in measures that have protected access to food and have not, thus far, experienced widespread disruptions in food supplies. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and other United Nations (UN) agencies are sharing best practices to help governments ensure the food supply continues to be stable. More information on what countries and business are doing in this regard can be found here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHCWKEOwmnc

It is still possible to purchase and consume a healthy diet during these difficult times. Diets vary greatly from place to place based on many factors including eating habits and culture. Yet, when it comes to food, there is a lot that we know about how to select the right combination of food to attain a healthy diet regardless of where we live.

To maintain healthy diets, FAO encourages everyone to:

- **Eat a variety of foods within each food group and across all the food groups** to ensure adequate intake of important nutrients. For advice on what constitutes a healthy diet in your country, FAO has compiled many countries' Food-based dietary guidelines, you may find your country advice here: www.fao.org/nutrition/education/food-dietary-guidelines/en/

- **Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables.** Fresh fruits and vegetables provide lots of vitamins and minerals as well as fiber that we need for healthy diet. To limit your trips to the market or supermarket, in addition to fresh fruits and vegetables, you can also buy frozen or canned fruits and vegetables. These fruits and vegetables also contain vitamins and minerals. However, in the canning and processing of these products, sometimes other ingredients such as sugar, salt, or preservatives are added. Be sure to read the labels so you can choose the options that are best for you and your family in order to limit intake of these ingredients.
- **Consume a diet rich in whole grains, nuts, and healthy fats such as in olive, sesame, peanut or other oils rich in unsaturated fatty acids.** Such diets may support your immune system and help to reduce inflammation.
- **Watch your intake of fats, sugar, and salt.** Many people in times of high stress, use food as a comfort, which can lead to overconsumption. Furthermore, foods in which we find comfort are oftentimes very palatable because they are high in fat, sugar, salt and calories. Try to avoid eating too much of these ingredients not only as comfort foods but across everything you eat. Again, food labels are helpful here so that consumers can limit the purchasing and eating of these ingredients that should be found only in limited amounts in a healthy diet.
- **Continue to practice good food hygiene.** Because of COVID-19 pandemic, you might be more concerned about food safety; however, COVID-19 is a respiratory virus and is not a food-borne disease. There is no evidence that the disease can be spread through contact with the food purchased. However, it's always good to remember how we can support food safety by practicing the five keys to food safety: (1) keep clean; (2) separate raw and cooked; (3) cook thoroughly; (4) keep food at safe temperatures; and (5) use safe water and raw materials. More detail can be found here: www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/consumer/manual_keys.pdf
- **Drink water regularly.** Staying well hydrated, mainly through drinking ample amounts of plain water (6-8 glasses a day for most adults) also helps our immune system. Drinking plain water instead of sugar- sweetened beverages, also helps reduce the risk of consuming too many calories for maintaining a healthy weight.
- **Limit consumption of alcohol.** Another way many people try to cope with stress is through having an alcoholic drink. These drinks have little nutritional value, are oftentimes high in calories, and excess consumption is linked to numerous health problems. If you drink alcohol, do so only in moderation.

Many people are concerned that food might be running out from supermarket shelves. However, in most cases those empty shelves indicate bottlenecks in getting some products to consumers, not that the food supply is not available at all. Many retailers in countries around the globe are working to overcome this challenge by hiring extra workers to rapidly restock shelves, reducing store hours to allow more time to restock, and redeploying workers from other tasks to help with restocking shelves. For more general information on food supply see FAO's FAQs here: www.fao.org/2019-ncov/q-and-a/

You may also buy your food online and get it delivered directly to your home. In many areas this can be done through supermarkets or big online retailers. It can also be done with community supported agriculture systems where small farmers are selling directly to consumers and through food boxes delivered to homes. This is also a way to support local farmers!

FAO suggests not buying more than your family needs to **reduce the risk of unnecessary food waste**. FAO also recommends applying the nine simple steps to reduce household-level food waste. 1) Ask for smaller portions, 2) love your leftovers, 3) shop smart, 4) buy "ugly" fruits and vegetables, 5) check your fridge, 6) practice first in, first out (FIFO), 7) understand dates on your food, 8) turn waste into compost, 9) sharing is caring: give to help. Find more here: www.fao.org/platform-food-loss-waste/en/

Because many people are at home with their children, this time together can be used to start children on the road to lifelong habits that support a healthy diet. Fun activities to download for kids at home to learn about healthy diets and nutrition can be found in the Nutrition Challenge Badge found here: www.fao.org/yunga/resources/challenge-badges/nutrition/en/

And don't forget, in addition to a healthy diet, other lifestyle factors are critical part of maintaining wellbeing and a healthy immune system. A healthy lifestyle includes additional strategies such as:

- **not smoking;**
- **exercising regularly;**
- **getting adequate sleep; and,**
- **minimizing and coping with stress.**