

In Professor Nola Dippenaar's continuing series on health matters for La Vie Care Wellness, she looks at the importance of correct diet. While she says that exercise will always come first, what we eat comes a close second!

By Terry Owen

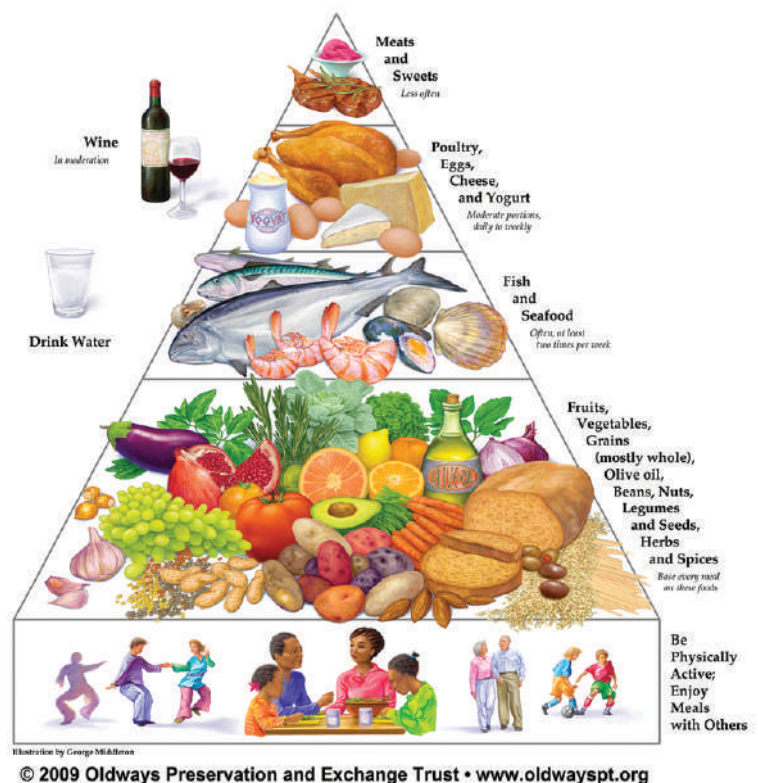
Professor Dippenaar says all the exercise in the world is not going to help you if you are eating unhealthily. She is a proponent of the Mediterranean diet and says that it is something that anyone (including the elderly) can follow.

"It's actually very simple to follow this diet – and actually, it's not a diet at all, although that's what it is commonly known as. It's a process where better healthy choices are made.

Lots of colour needed

She says that what is needed is colour on your plate – all the vegetables of different colours look appetising and taste delicious.

"Every colour is a different antioxidant, and the brain needs antioxidants because it is a big consumer of oxygen. Here's an interesting observation – a study in April 2019 comparing all the diets and ways of eating in the world and in most categories, the researchers concluded that the Mediterranean diet was the healthiest diet!"



Professor Dippenaar says the food on your plate should contain one-third animal product and two-thirds plant mix – and the plant selection should contain as much colour as possible.

"I have a client who believes that what I am proposing for a diet is expensive and way out of reach of the ordinary person. Nothing can be further from the truth. Look at the breakfast meal – what you should be having are two eggs (free range eggs), which contain the most amazing amount of nutrition, and you can have them any way you like – fried, scrambled, poached, omelette, whatever your taste is.

"Add to that some avocado, a sliced tomato, fried onions, some green peppers and a little mushrooms with a slice of whole wheat bread – and you have the best, most nutritional starter to the day. It's not expensive, particularly if you buy vegetables in season. It's just different and requires a bit of change of mindset on behalf of whoever is preparing the dishes, if you live at a retirement centre."

Professor Dippenaar also says that a retirement centre offers great advantages for mealtimes, other than eating healthy food.

Great time to socialise

"People are eating together, and it's an ideal time for people to socialise. This is a vital thing for people living at these centres. You make friends and you connect! This is so important. When I've visited these centres, I've often seen people just staring into space. While obviously people need their own space, I feel this is sometimes because they have no other option. I know other people don't like to intrude on someone's solitude, but a brief 'hello, how are you?' can make the world of difference in a lonely person's life. This is why you have the perfect opportunity at mealtimes to talk to each other. Make the most of the food – and your company!"

Walking, though, she says, is more important than food. Exercise is the number one activity that everyone, capability allowing naturally, should be engaged in. Don't forget, as explained in our last post with Professor Dippenaar, exercise feeds oxygen to the brain and the brain needs lots of it. Also vital, says Professor Dippenaar, is Vitamin D, which is naturally supplied by the sun. People at centres are obviously not going to spend time lying in the sun – and even with sunblock this could be dangerous – but there are Vitamin D supplements by the dozen which will do the trick.

Also, if you are not active enough to walk, try and keep your mind as occupied as possible with games – bridge and other card games, even jigsaw puzzles and crosswords. It is also important to get enough sleep.

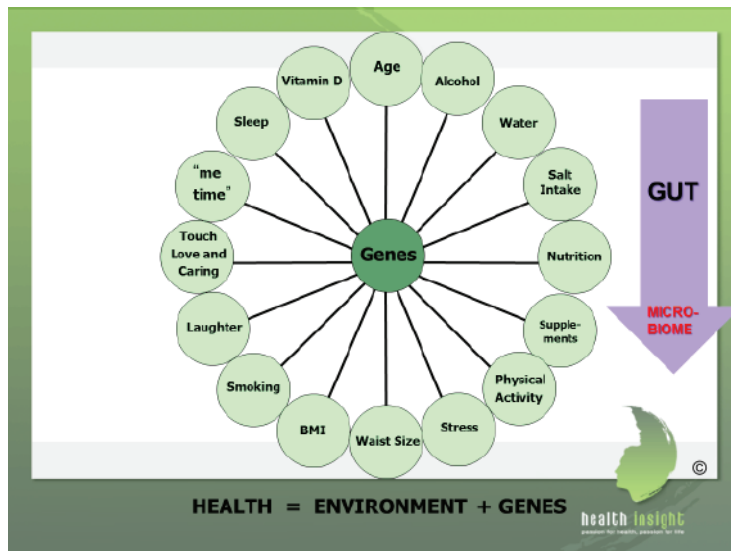
Virgin olive oil

"I digress," says Professor Dippenaar. "Don't forget to use extra virgin olive oil. It's not a lot more than the house brand and it's full of antioxidants. When it comes to vegetables, we are so blessed in this country with an array of magnificent vegetables. We are really spoilt for choice. With the veggies in season, go for whatever is cheapest. Ensure the veggies are not overcooked. Have them steamed or eat them raw. Either way, they are delicious. You should also have lots of salads. Pasta is okay as well. For the evening meal, just have a mixed salad. It's most important to realise that a variety of colour is vital."

She says that healthy fats are essential, and the Mediterranean diet differentiates between unhealthy and healthy fats.

"It's important to measure "D" levels because there's very little "D" in food except for eggs (free range) and oily fish like sardines, pilchards and anchovies. You can make a great meal of fish cakes using pilchards out of the can with onion and eggs. This is highly nutritious, and good for your brain. Above all, it's exceptionally cheap!"

Prof Dippenaar says that stress also affects memory. That's why enough sleep and walking every day is important to reduce stress levels. Stress also has a major effect on the hippocampus (see diagramme).



She says by walking and socialising at mealtimes you reduce chronic stress levels.

She says that genes don't play more than 20% your body's outcome. "The rest is up to you," she says.

"The lining of the gut is particularly affected by stress. What's very interesting here is that the lining of the gut is very similar to the lining around the brain, called the Blood Brain Barrier.

The gut-brain axis vital. This is where first brain, second brain play critical roles (see side bar)."

Prof Dippenaar says this is all part of empowering people in retirement centres. Once people take control of their bodies and minds it's amazing how different people begin to feel.

"Aside from what we've been talking about, even just tending to a little garden they've started, and watching things grow has had incredible effect. There's also learning the basics of computers. Someone can come around and teach residents the fundamentals, including how to Skype and be able to contact friends and children. It makes a huge difference to their lives."

She says that watching television also engages the brain, so is important. "To keep pace with a plot, or just watching documentaries on channels like Animal Planet and Nat Geographic keeps the mind active. Aside from that, there are many audiobooks, especially from Amazon, that are available and would find a very ready home in the centres.

LOOK OUT FOR MORE FROM PROFESSOR DIPPENAAR IN UPCOMING ISSUES

SIDEBAR: First Brain, Second Brain EXPLAINED

Millions of neurons in the gastrointestinal tract coordinate their activity to generate the muscle contractions that propel waste through the last leg of the digestive system, according to a study of isolated mouse colons published in *JNeurosci*. The newly identified neuronal firing pattern may represent an early feature preserved through the evolution of nervous systems.

The enteric nervous system (ENS) is known as the "second brain", or the brain in the gut, because it can operate independently of the brain and spinal cord, the central nervous system (CNS). It has also been called the "first brain" based on evidence suggesting that the ENS evolved before the CNS. Despite the known role of the ENS in generating motor activity in the colon, observing ENS neurons in action has been a challenge.

Nick Spencer and colleagues combined a new neuronal imaging technique with electrophysiology records of smooth muscle to reveal a pattern of activity that involves many different types of neurons firing simultaneously in repetitive bursts to activate the muscle cells at the same rate. They demonstrate how this rhythmic activity generates so-called colonic migrating motor complexes to transport fecal pellets through the mouse colon. These findings identify a previously unknown pattern of neuronal activity in the peripheral nervous system.

Story Source:

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