

How to feel good with food

What we eat each day has an extraordinary impact on our lives. It not only affects our vulnerability to diseases over time, but it also influences our physical and cognitive abilities, as well as our emotional state. Healthy food choices matter. They empower us to perform and achieve at work and school and enable us to enjoy our leisure time more fully.

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South Africa pays a high price in the form of disease burden that is related to our food choices. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension and Type 2 diabetes are prevalent and on the rise. Being overweight or obese is a major risk factor for these NCDs. According to the 2016 SADHS (South African Demographic and Health Survey), 68% of South African women and 31% of men are overweight or obese with about 20% of women and 3% of men who are severely obese.

All too often, South African diets include plenty of foods and drinks that are high in sugar, salt and fat, while low in vegetables, fruits and whole grains. There is also a high consumption of highly processed convenience foods over meals using whole food ingredients that are prepared and enjoyed at home.

From 9 to 15 October, the Department of Health is joining forces with key partners to increase awareness that nutritious food can impact not only on physical health but mental well-being too. The collaborators and other interested parties will promote the National Nutrition Week 2023 theme 'Feel Good with Food' with the aim of reaching South Africans who don't necessarily focus on healthy eating and healthy lifestyles.

The National Department of Health points out that poor food and drink choices often start in early childhood. The 2016 SADHS found that 18% of children between 6 and 8 months of age consumed salty snacks and 4% consumed sugary drinks the day before the survey. This increased significantly to 64% and 33% respectively, when it came to toddlers between 18 and 23 months of age. To prevent both over- and under-nutrition, children between 6 and 24 months of age should be consuming foods and drinks that contribute to their nutritional needs. It is important to note that the same survey reported that around 13.3% of South African children under five years are overweight or obese, which is more than double the global average of

6.1%.

Maria van der Merwe, the president of ADSA (Association for Dietetics in South Africa) says: “Globally, nutrition experts recommend increasing consumption of plant-based foods including vegetables and fruits whole-grains, nuts and seeds, as well as focusing on meals prepared at home from whole foods. South African families, schools and workplaces need to make it easier for children and adults to make healthy eating choices by ensuring that nutritious foods are accessible to them each day.

“What’s important to realise is that healthy eating does not have to be more costly, in fact, it can be cost saving. Growing some of your own vegetables, fruits and herbs at home, school or in your community increases access to nutritious options, and meal planning can boost nutrition quality while saving on the household budget.”

Unicef South Africa, one of the partners in National Nutrition Week 2023, has an ongoing focus on the impact of healthy eating and physical activity in the lives of South African children. Lea Castro, Unicef’s nutrition officer says: “Our most recent research showed that schools have a critical role to play in promoting healthy lifestyles and healthy eating, and empowering children to feel good with food. We found limited healthy food options available in schools and low levels of nutrition knowledge amongst both learners and educators resulting in a low intake of vegetables and fruits, and a high intake of foods high in fat, sugar and salt.

“This can be transformed by ensuring that the foods available in and around schools are healthy, and by focusing on including the importance of healthy eating and the South African Guidelines for Healthy Eating in the curriculum. School-going children need healthy food and physical activity not only for their physical development, but to support their academic performance and mental well-being.”

With over a quarter of South African children under the age of five suffering from nutritional stunting, urgent action is required to alleviate the situation. Acute malnutrition not only hampers physical growth but also poses a significant threat to children’s lifelong well-being and overall brain development. Dr Edzani Mphaphuli, executive director of the Grow Great Campaign says: “Ensuring that nutritious food is affordable and accessible to all children and pregnant women is one of the steps to tackling underlying causes of malnutrition and promoting a diverse and healthy diet.”

It’s not just the youth who need more awareness of the South African Guidelines for Healthy Eating, parents, educators and employers will all benefit from focusing on these healthy eating principles. Dr Elize Symington, the president of the Nutrition Society of South Africa (NSSA) says: “Most of what we eat each day should consist of unprocessed or minimally processed plant foods such as vegetables, fruits, legume and whole grains. Variety is important and so, foods from other food groups should be included in our meals, but in smaller proportions, such as unprocessed meat, eggs, fish and chicken.

“Sugar, salt and fat should be used sparingly in food preparation or at the table. Drinking water is an important part of healthy eating and should therefore be the beverage of choice. It’s best to avoid sugary drinks. Probably the easiest way to improve the quality of our diets is to prepare most of our meals at home where we have full control over the ingredients used and the portion sizes.

“Meal planning helps to minimise the time and effort that it takes to prepare lunchboxes for school and work so that you are not reliant on unhealthy fast foods or tuckshop foods when you get hungry during the school or workday. Developing your home-cooking skills and meal planning efficiency can result in healthier meals.

better portion control and adds enjoyment to home life. It's a good idea to get your children involved in meal preparation as this improves their nutrition knowledge and life skills development while creating opportunities for family bonding."



The National Nutrition Week 2023 highlights these tips for planning and preparing quick, healthy and affordable home meals:

- **Plan your meals** – On a weekly or monthly basis, draw up a food budget and a meal plan. Focus on variety of foods that are affordable and in season. Base your shopping lists on your meal plan, and only buy the items you need.
- **Prepare meals in healthy ways** – Choose recipes that are quick and easy. Include raw vegetables and salads in your meals. Use cooking methods such as steaming, boiling and baking grilling instead of frying.
- **Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit every day** – High in fibre and packed with vitamins and minerals, vegetables and fruit are essential for healthy bodies and minds. Make sure you eat a minimum of five vegetables and fruits every day, not just on weekends. Include indigenous vegetables whenever possible. Eat a yellow/orange vegetable such as carrots, pumpkin, butternut or a dark green vegetable such as broccoli or spinach at least once a day.
- **Add extra vegetables to meals** – You can boost the nutritional quality, as well as flavour and texture by adding extra vegetables to meals such as stews, curries, stir-fries, salads, soups, sandwiches, pastas, rice and egg dishes.
- **Veg-ify your favourite recipes** – Swap some or all meat in your favourite dishes with plant-based alternatives. Meat can easily be replaced with vegetables like mushrooms, aubergine and baby marrows or with legumes like lentils, beans and chickpeas.
- **Eat dry beans, peas, lentils and soya regularly** – Eat legumes at least four times a week to help prevent chronic diseases, including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer and overweight, as well as improve gut health. Cost-effective beans, lentils and chickpeas can be used as

meat alternatives or to bulk up a dish and make the meat go further. Soaking dry legumes in water overnight reduces the cooking time and helps to prevent bloating.

- **Pack healthy breakfast/lunchboxes** – Include weekday breakfasts and lunches in your meal plan so that you can avoid buying from shops, canteens and tuckshops. You will save money and eat more healthily. These on-the-go, home-made meals should mostly consist of unprocessed or minimally processed plant-based foods.

For more information and healthy eating tips, visit National Nutrition Week 2023 www.nutritionweek.co.za.

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