

HEALING THROUGH NUTRITION

This form of therapy
seeks to improve health
through modifying lifestyle
and diet in a concerted
and sustained way.

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The average person grabs a cup of coffee and toast or cereal at breakfast, heads to the food court for lunch, and packs food home for dinner. His meals are likely to be overloaded with refined carbohydrates, cooked in oil of questionable quality, or loaded with MSG, preservatives and additives.

If he keeps this up, he may eventually find himself with a body that functions suboptimally or is stricken with chronic conditions such as diabetes, autoimmune disorders and thyroid problems. Although these are caused by many factors — including environmental toxins, stress, lack of exercise and genetics — food and drink play a part as well.

Nutritional therapists Josephine Ng and Dr Menka Gupta concur that poor nutrition and poor-quality food contribute significantly to chronic illnesses. Along with this, processed and junk food on supermarket shelves also find their way into our kitchens. So it is not surprising that the rate of chronic illnesses in developed countries is rising rapidly.

Dietary link to disease

Particular food types have also been linked to certain illnesses:

- A diet high in the wrong kind of saturated fat combined with excess consumption of refined carbohydrates has been found to raise the likelihood of heart disease.
- Eating simple or refined carbohydrates with a high glycaemic index, such as white bread and white rice, raises the risk of type 2 diabetes.

Adding to the challenge are current realities and standards of food production. These include vegetables grown on soils depleted of nutrients and contaminated by pollution, pesticides and industrial waste, and animals injected with hormones and antibiotics. A diet consisting largely of such food sources contributes to nutritional deficiencies and adds a "toxic load".



CAN CERTAIN FOODS CAUSE HEALTH CONDITIONS?

Nutritional therapists such as Ng stress that equating specific foods with specific illnesses is too simplistic because there is usually more than one cause of a disease. However, there are certain proven links.

- Gluten, a range of proteins found in grains such as wheat, rye, barley and spelt, has long been associated with Coeliac disease. This is an autoimmune condition in which the small intestine is damaged. Those with this disease have to be gluten-free for life. People with non-Coeliac gluten sensitivity may be able to eat small amounts of gluten or may be able to eat it after avoiding it for some time. Those with either condition — Coeliac and non-Coeliac gluten sensitivity — who consume gluten can experience symptoms such as abdominal and joint pain, bloating, constipation, brain fog and low energy levels.



According to Ng, wheat is the worst source of gluten. Part of the problem is that there are new hybrids and genetically modified versions, and they tend to be heavily sprayed with pesticides. This has been linked with damage to the gut wall and immune reactions.

- If you have thyroid problems and are iodine-deficient, you could be negatively affected by food containing goitrogens, which interfere with iodine absorption. Goitrogens are found mainly in raw cruciferous vegetables, unfermented soya and millet. They are, however, mostly destroyed when the vegetables are cooked and the soya is fermented. Millet, though, contains other antinutrients; even when cooked, it is unsuitable for people with an underactive thyroid.



THE CHALLENGE OF GROWING NUTRITIOUS FOOD

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

CURRENT CONDITIONS

Grown on soil that is depleted of nutrients due to intensive agriculture

Grown on soil that is contaminated by pollution, pesticides and industrial wastes



HOW WE ARE AFFECTED

Fruits and vegetables grown today are less nutritious than those grown in our grandparents' time

Contaminants are transferred into our bodies when we consume such fruits and vegetables

LIVESTOCK

Injected with hormones to promote growth, and increase milk production in cows

Fed antibiotics to treat infections



Hormones could induce the increase of insulin-like growth factor (IGF), which is linked to a higher risk of breast, prostate, and other cancers in humans

Danger of antibiotic-resistant bacteria developing and being transmitted to the general public

On the bright side, Ng and Dr Gupta, who has a background in conventional and functional medicine, believe that the body has an innate ability to heal when it is given the right nutrients, rest and movement.

"All cells, organs, systems and the interrelated processes in our body need specific nutrients to do their jobs. Getting these in the right amounts is crucial for all your body processes to function properly, for your cells and organs to deal with toxins, and for your body to be able to handle stress," says Ng.

Putting the pieces together

While dietitians typically assess a client's dietary needs, plan menus and advise on proper nutrition, nutritional therapists begin by searching for the underlying causes of a client's health concern.

This involves exploring in great detail a client's personal health and family health history, a physical examination and laboratory testing. Ng — a member of the British Association for Applied and Nutritional Therapy and who is registered with the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (UK) — likens her job to that of a detective, piecing together clues to solve a health jigsaw puzzle.

She examines how and what different body systems are affected or out of balance, and how they relate to each other. "I would also look at how diet, environment and a person's genetics come into play to manifest a certain illness and symptoms," she explains. She also looks into her clients' psychological history, key life events that may have precipitated or contributed to the health issue, their diet from a young age — she will even ask about their mother's diet during pregnancy!

Armed with this information, she reviews test results clients already have from their doctors and may suggest additional ones to find out which body systems are out of balance, what nutrient deficiencies are causing the malfunction, what's causing inflammation, and which toxins have overloaded certain systems. Clients may be referred back to their doctors for additional tests. She may



also recommend DNA tests for genetic factors that predispose certain health situations.

From there, she tailors a programme to suit the client, and this may involve recommending specific vitamins, minerals, enzymes, glandulars and others.

Besides nutrition, Ng and Dr Gupta also consider lifestyle issues such as stress, which has a severe knock-on effect on the functioning of body systems and limits the body's ability to handle and eliminate toxins. Stress and toxic overload affect many body functions, which eventually breaks down the immune system.

"I try to help clients identify the source and

suggest ways to manage the stress, for example, simple deep breathing, simple meditation and mindfulness practice," Ng explains.

Relevant for all conditions


Nutritional therapy is relevant to every form of ill-health, says Ng. She has helped people suffering from diabetes, metabolic syndrome, hypertension, gut issues (from irritable bowel syndrome to inflammatory bowel diseases), mental health issues, and endocrine problems.

In some cases, clients improve within a couple of weeks while more complex cases can take several months. "A lot depends on how much a client is willing

to do or is able to take on," says Ng.

Both she and Dr Gupta view nutritional therapy as an approach that complements conventional medicine. When she lived in Hong Kong, Ng practised at a medical clinic where she worked hand-in-hand with doctors. "Even if I do not work directly with the doctor, I work in such a way that it is safe for clients, no matter what medications they are on." Care is taken to always ensure that there are no contraindications between what she recommends and

the medication a client is on.

Dr Gupta, who works with individuals and organisations to draw up personalised nutrition programmes, stresses that nutritional therapy does not claim to treat but to support clients towards improved health. "All of us, including those with chronic illnesses, have the potential to transform our health through nutrition and lifestyle changes. With the right kind of nutrients and lifestyle modifications, we can bring about optimal balance to promote optimum health." 

DIETITIANS

Required by the Singapore Nutritionist and Dietetics Association (SNDA) to have a degree in nutrition and dietetics

Undergo practical training via a clinical placement or dietetic internship after graduation

Apply scientific knowledge of food and human nutrition to maintain and promote health

Can provide therapeutic advice to sick people

May modify diets of patients in hospital to treat diseases and health concerns; eg. obesity, diabetes and so forth

May oversee the nutritional needs of hospital patients who are unable to eat normally

May specialise in areas such as renal or paediatric dietetics

NUTRITIONAL THERAPISTS

To become a member of the British Association for Applied and Nutritional Therapy, you need to have either a degree or diploma from an accredited institute and be registered with Complementary and Natural Health Council, which is approved by the UK Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care

Not required to undergo clinical attachments, only clinical consultation training and supervision during their course of study

Take in-depth health history and use a range of scientific tools to assess and identify nutritional imbalances and other underlying causes that may contribute to an individual's symptoms and health concerns

Design personalised programmes to support individuals to achieve good health

VS

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