Prevention makes “cents”

It’s a commonly held belief that eating healthy is expensive, but focusing only on the costs of food at a meal, and not the value of a healthy diet over a lifetime, misses the bigger picture. March is National Nutrition Month. It is the month we examine our diets and make positive changes to improve our health through more nutritious choices.

Less healthy choices of foods cost us in medical costs, productivity, and even loss of life. The USDA says good choices could prevent an expenditure of $71 billion. However, most nutritionists believe this number far underestimates actual costs, because it only considers diet related heart disease, stroke and cancer. There are many other diet related diseases that aren’t counted in this number. Osteoporosis costs $14 billion and obesity costs $117 billion.

The Department of Health and Human Services says unhealthy eating and lack of movement add to the deaths of between 310,000 and 580,000 people each year. You are far more likely to die from nutrition related disease than to be killed by guns or drug use.

The typical American diet is too high in saturated fat, sodium, and sugar and too low in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, calcium, and fiber. Such a diet contributes to four of the six leading causes of death and increases the risk of numerous diseases, including: heart disease, diabetes, obesity, hypertension, stroke, osteoporosis, and many cancers (colon, prostate, mouth, throat, esophagus, lung, stomach).

The record is clear. We need to invest our time and dollars in a nutritious diet and make positive steps to health.
There is much information available on how to have a nutritious diet. The problem is that some of the information that is put up on the web or in print may or may not be true. Here is the current research based information on how to choose healthy foods.

Increase fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are low in calories and have many beneficial nutrients. Choose those that have the highest nutrient count. Keep these foods handy for snacking. It is much better to choose an apple than a candy bar or chips.

Choose whole foods. Processed foods are high in sodium, fat, and low in fiber. Choose potatoes rather than potato chips and an apple rather than apple juice. Those who start with real ingredients are far more likely to have a nutritious diet.

Think your drink. Beverages provide almost 20% of the calories in the average American’s diet. Many drinks are loaded up with extra calories, fat, and sugars. Make careful choices to increase nutritional content and decrease all the extra calories. Increase your consumption of water and milk and decrease sodas, sugar sweetened drinks, and high sugar juices.

You should be drinking at least one half to 1 ounce of water per pound. So if you weigh 150 pounds, you should drink between 75 (a little more than 2 quarts plus 1 cup) and 150 ounces (1 gallon and 3 cups) per day. Low fat milk provides high levels of calcium, so be sure to include some in your diet.

Eat high quality protein. It doesn’t matter if you choose meat or vegetable sources, make sure you get enough protein. Protein is the building block for cells in your body. Get plenty in your diet.

Get over the idea that there are good and bad foods. Instead, group foods as sometimes and all times foods. That chocolate cake isn’t bad, it is a sometimes food. Items like fruits, vegetables, nuts, and high quality protein are all time foods. But occasionally, you simply must have that chocolate cake.

The final advice is to get a wide variety of foods. You are far more likely to get the nutrients you need by varying your diet. A varied diet will also fight off boredom, which can derail the best laid plans.

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