

Nutrition 101: Diet Culture

The COVID-19 pandemic led to lockdowns in the U.S. and people all across the country stayed cooped up at home. According to a study by the American Psychology Association (APA), 61% of Americans experienced undesired weight changes during the pandemic. This has resulted in a plethora of diet trends as people try to get their “pre-pandemic bodies” back. These include some fad diets such as juice cleanses, liquid diets, and the ever-so-popular ketogenic or “keto” diet.

Dr. Shitaldas Pamnani, an OSF HealthCare internal medicine physician at OSF HealthCare Saint Clare Medical Center in Princeton, Illinois, warns that these types of trends are not without risk – and offers tips for sustainable, long-term healthy eating.

Shitaldas Pamnani, M.D., PhD, Internal Medicine, OSF HealthCare Saint Clare Medical Center

“We are seeing more young people get prediabetes, which is basically early stage of diabetes. All of the sugary drinks, Gatorade, even fruit juices which is something I want to stress. If you go to your grocery store or other stores where you buy your juice, look at the glucose or sugar content and how much added sugars they have added to the juice. You will be surprised. Even the orange juice or other natural juice that are promoted as healthy are not really healthy.” (:31)

In addition to prediabetes or type two diabetes, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warns that people who often drink sugary drinks are more likely to face health problems such as weight gain, obesity, heart disease, kidney diseases, non-alcoholic liver disease, cavities, and gout.

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“The best option? Water. Plain water. Natural, no calories, no excess sodium or potassium, so that is the best thing for you. Sometimes people think that Gatorade is giving them more energy but it is more of a placebo effect because you see it on TV or your favorite athlete or someone is promoting it – but plain water is as good for hydration as anything.” (:27)

If you or members of your family, especially children, are not a fan of plain water, you can add sugar-free flavor to it with fresh fruits such as berries, lemons, or limes. And when it comes to getting in healthy nutrients, whole and natural foods are where you should get your calories from – not from juices. Not only is it the healthier route, but you actually consume more calories than you realize when on a so-called “liquid diet.”

In addition to reducing the intake of sugar-filled drinks, Dr. Pamnani warns that you should also be careful with smoothies. Many people use smoothies as a meal replacement or for a quick, on-the-go healthy breakfast. However, the ingredients you may add can actually make your seemingly healthy smoothie not-so-healthy, so it is important to stick to whole fruits and 100% fruit juices. Dr. Pamnani also recommends adding some veggies.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s most recent [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), almost 90% of the U.S. population does not meet the daily recommendation for vegetables, which is where we get so many of our nutrients needed to nourish our body and increase our energy.

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“We definitely need more greens. Strawberries taste good, bananas taste good, but they also have a high amount of sugar which is the reason they taste good. They are more fructose-based so they are not in the processed sugar category and they are still much healthier than the processed orange juice. But definitely spinach and vegetables, fiber is a big component, zinc, selenium, magnesium – all of the good nutrients that are sometimes lacking are easily available through foods like spinach, avocado, broccoli.” (:30)

Another fad diet that Dr. Pamnani cautions people about is the keto diet that has been a big trend in recent years. While it may result in some form of weight loss, it greatly increases the risk of other health issues in individuals.

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“It works dramatically. Within one month you can lose ten pounds and might feel amazing but down the road – they just recently came out with a study – and they are finding more heart attacks, stroke, higher risk of death. It’s simple – your cholesterol will go high and that is linked to cardiovascular disease.” (:17)

The keto diet consists of about 60 to 80% of calories coming from fat. Dr. Pamnani warns that this extremely high percentage of fat intake is not sustainable for a long-term healthy lifestyle.

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“Yes, the keto diet can help with rapid weight loss but any short cut has side effects. The big ones I want to point out are fatty liver and high cholesterol. If you want to lose weight and want to follow something similar, I would lay out a plan like 30/30/30 percent of everything – carbs, protein, and fruits and veggies – and then five to ten percent fats. Don’t overeat on the fat.” (:23)

He adds that your intake of meats and poultry should be fresh and in lean forms versus processed or red meats.

Overall, the key to healthy weight loss includes fresh whole fruits and veggies, whole foods (including healthy whole grains), increasing your water intake, and limiting your processed foods and red meat intake.

Finally, kicking old habits is a big first step. According to the CDC, common eating habits that can lead to weight gain include eating too fast, always cleaning your plate, eating when not hungry, always eating dessert, or skipping meals. Some tips to change these habits include paying attention to these bad habits and replacing them with good ones: eating more slowly, eating only when you are truly hungry, and planning meals ahead of time.

To learn more about weight loss and proper nutrition, go to <http://healthlibrary.osfhealthcare.org/Library/NutritionFacts/>.