

“Two pints of lager...

and a packet of crisps, please”

Students are portrayed as beer swilling, junk food addicts that couldn't cook a vegetable even if they wanted too. But surely that is an injustice?

It may be true that a few students live happily on a diet of chips, but many try hard to achieve a healthy, balanced diet within the many constraints of a limited budget and poor cooking facilities. In a recent shopping survey, the average weekly spend on food and drink by students was £29.82, with male students spending considerably more than females (£34.23 and £25.64 per week respectively). Home cooked meals received the highest average proportion of the spend (56 per cent), followed by ready meals (8 per cent) and takeaways (8 per cent). Alcohol contributed to 22 per cent of the grocery budget.

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A balanced diet

When questioned, 79 per cent of students say that they try to eat a balanced diet. To achieve this it is important to consider 'The Balance of Good Health' which is produced by the Food Standards Agency (see Figure 1). No single food contains all the nutrients we need for health, so it is important to eat a wide variety of different foods each day.

Fruit and vegetables

Eat at least five portions per day: fresh, frozen, canned or dried all count. One of your portions can even be a glass of fresh juice. These all contain antioxidants, fibre, vitamins and minerals as well as being low in fat and they will help you maintain a healthy heart and reduce the risk of some types of cancer.

What is a portion?

- ▶ Two to three tablespoons of green or root vegetables or pulses, like kidney or baked beans
- ▶ A dessert bowlful of salad
- ▶ One medium sized piece of fresh fruit such as apple, pear or banana
- ▶ One large slice of fruit such as melon or pineapple
- ▶ Two small fruits like satsumas or kiwi fruit
- ▶ One cupful of berries or grapes
- ▶ Two to three tablespoons of cooked or canned fruit
- ▶ One glass of fruit or vegetable juice
- ▶ Half to one tablespoon of dried fruit, like raisins or dried apricots.

Fruit and vegetables do not need to be expensive:

- ▶ Choose those in season
- ▶ Buy them loose rather than pre-packed as they tend to be cheaper
- ▶ Fruit and vegetable markets are a great place to negotiate good deals
- ▶ Frozen, dried and canned varieties are alternatives to fresh produce — supermarket own label brands tend to be the cheapest.

Did you know . . . ?

- ▶ In the Middle Ages, carrots were also purple and yellow. It took hundreds of years for orange carrots to be fashionable!
- ▶ Jerusalem artichokes are famous for producing ferocious flatulence.
- ▶ Prunes may be changing their name to “dried plums” in an attempt to improve their image.

Starchy foods

At least a third of what we eat should be made up from potatoes, bread, rice, pasta, couscous, grains and breakfast cereals (ie, at least three good servings per day). These provide us with energy from carbohydrates as well as lots of vitamins and minerals and by choosing wholegrain varieties, you

will also boost your fibre intake. These foods provide bulk in our diet and help fill us up so they are wonderful value for money.

Breakfast

More than three-quarters of students who took part in a survey said that they skipped breakfast. Skipping the first meal of the day has been shown to decrease ability in scholarly achievement, especially where problem solving or remembering new information is required. What could be easier to eat than a quick bowl of cereal on your way out in the morning? Fortified breakfast cereals contain vitamin B1, which also has a role in optimising mental performance throughout the morning.

Dairy produce

Again three portions per day of milk, yoghurt, cheese or dishes made from them is the order of the day. They supply us with a good range of vitamins and minerals, especially calcium, which is essential for bones and teeth. Choose low fat varieties as they still contain all the essential calcium but are lower in saturated and total fat.

The following are equivalent to one serving:

- ▶ 200 ml (1/3 pint) skimmed/semi-skimmed milk — try it on cereal, in milk shakes, custards and puddings and savoury sauces, like cheese sauce
- ▶ One pot of low fat yoghurt or fromage frais (natural or fruit) — a quick and convenient snack or pudding; serve natural yoghurt with curry to cool it down or experiment with it on top of cereal instead of milk
- ▶ 30g cheese — ideal eaten on its own or melted on toast or jacket potatoes; use a low fat cheese spread on toast or mix some with onions, garlic and herbs for a delicious dip
- ▶ 110g ice cream — a great way to get your calcium, but be careful to use the reduced fat versions

Bone health

Osteoporosis is a painful bone disease that is currently increasing to epidemic proportions with the most significant rise in numbers among women in their twenties and thirties. It occurs when the inner mesh of the bones becomes bigger, making them fragile and likely to break easily, especially in areas like our hips, wrists and spine. It can be due to a number of factors, one of which is the amount of calcium in our bones and so it is very important to optimise the calcium levels to help reduce your risk of osteoporosis.

Bones stop growing in length between the ages of 16–18, but do continue to grow in strength into your mid-twenties where they will reach their maximum potential strength (peak bone mass). You can ensure that your bones get the calcium they need by consuming at least three servings of calcium-rich foods per day; this will optimise their strength potential. And if you don't eat dairy produce, you need to get your calcium from other sources such as tinned fish, green vegetables, dried fruits and nuts — but this may take a bit more planning to ensure an adequate intake.

Meat, fish and protein alternatives

Poultry, meat, lentils, beans, nuts, fish, and eggs provide valuable protein and minerals such as iron and zinc. Eat two servings per day and try to vary these daily to ensure a full range of nutrients.

Choose lean meat (why pay all that money for fat) and try mixing it with pulses to make it go further. The classic dish of chilli con carne is a good example of a dish where small amounts of minced beef are supplemented by canned kidney and baked beans. Red lentils mixed with minced lamb makes a wonderful shepherds pie! What other combinations can you invent?

Fresh fish can be very expensive, but canned fish is great value and very

handy. Especially good are the canned oily fish such as mackerel, sardines, salmon and pilchards as they are valuable sources of omega-3 fatty acids, which can help reduce your risk of heart disease.

Vegetarianism

Increasing numbers of people are choosing to follow a vegetarian diet of one form or another. Their healthiness depends on how nutritionally well balanced each particular vegetarian diet is. However, some vegetarians may rely too much on cheese as a meat substitute as well as vegetarian convenience products such as burgers, pies and pizzas. In addition to being expensive these are low in iron and high in fat and sodium.

Great vegetarian meal ideas:

- ▶ Hummus with pitta bread and vegetable fingers
- ▶ Stuffed jacket potatoes
- ▶ Pasta with spicy vegetable sauce
- ▶ Tofu stir fry
- ▶ Mushroom risotto
- ▶ Greek salad with crusty bread
- ▶ Red kidney bean stew
- ▶ Vegetable kebabs
- ▶ Watercress, apple and walnut salad
- ▶ Vegetable and lentil pie
- ▶ Peanut burgers
- ▶ Sweet and sour noodles.

Other ideas could be obtained from vegetarian and vegan cookbooks from your library.

High fat and sugary foods

There are no foods that are completely banned from a healthy, balanced diet but foods high in fat or sugar are best eaten in moderate amounts only. These are things like cakes, pastries, crisps, sweets, fizzy drinks and biscuits — great tasting but of little nutritional value. The trick is to have them sparingly and as a treat as it is these types of foods that can cause those extra pounds to pile on your hips and stomach.

Weight control

Being overweight or underweight can pose a risk to your health. To assess your weight you need to calculate your body mass index (BMI).

Body mass index

$$\text{BMI} = \frac{\text{weight (kg)}}{\text{height (m)}^2}$$

A BMI of less than 19 indicates that you are underweight and may need to put on weight.

If your BMI is 19 to 25, this indicates you are a healthy weight, and you should aim to stay that way.

If your BMI is 26 to 30 this means that you are overweight and need to make sure that your weight does not continue to rise.

A BMI of over 30 means that your health is at risk and you should follow a healthy diet and be physically active in order to lose weight.

Activity

Regular physical activity has great health benefits but you do not need to be a member of an expensive, trendy gym to keep in trim. You should choose an activity that you enjoy, set your own achievable goals and make sure that they are realistic. Thirty minutes of moderate intensity exercise each day, such as walking, swimming, cycling or dancing, is a good guide — but any amount of exercise is better than none at all!

But what about chocolate?

Chocolate is the most commonly reported food item that is craved, particularly by women during the premenstrual phase. As yet, there is no clear explanation for this phenomenon — it may simply be due to its mouth-feel and taste or due to the release of specific chemicals in the brain. Whatever the answer, chocolate can certainly fit into a healthy, balanced diet as long as it does not dominate it.

And finally, drinks . . .

Fluid is essential to life and you should drink about 1–2 litres of fluid per day — more if the weather is hot or you are very active. This should come from a variety of different drinks like tap water itself (the cheapest and the best fluid around), fruit juices, milk or tea. Avoid overdosing on strong black coffee as although the caffeine in it is a stimulant and can increase mental alertness, it also induces mild dependency. A maximum of three to four cups per day is fine for the majority of people.

Alcohol

When drinking alcohol there are some general rules that you should consider:

- ▶ It is best to avoid drinking alcohol on an empty stomach, as this will prevent it going to your head quickly
- ▶ Binge drinking is dangerous
- ▶ Even small amounts of alcohol will make you feel less alert and less able to do things that need concentration
- ▶ Stay with friends when you are drinking — do not leave with strangers
- ▶ Do not drink and drive
- ▶ People who are drunk are more likely to have an accident, get into an argument or take stupid risks
- ▶ Drinking alcohol together with drugs is particularly dangerous.

So the message about alcohol is to be sensible and drink within your limits.

By paying attention to what you eat and drink you can maximise your potential, enjoy your student life to the full and have great tasting food too! Good health! ☺

Useful websites

www.surgerydoor.co.uk (click on healthy eating)

www.nusonline.co.uk (click on advice and then health)