Nutrition for Massage Therapists

Eat for Energy

by Lauren Obermann Dauro, R.D., L.D.

As a massage therapist, you focus on helping others—but don’t forget that before you can care for others, you must care for yourself.

One of the best things you can do for yourself is take in healthy, wholesome nutrition to prevent disease and provide lasting energy; however, it seems as if every day there is something new about nutrition in the media, whether a new discovery, a quick-fix diet or miracle supplement. How do you know what information to trust? In this article, I hope to clarify some of the hot topics you’ve been hearing about.

Miracle vitamin?

Vitamin D is getting a lot of publicity these days, and for good reason. It has long been known that vitamin D pairs up with calcium for bone health and also assists with the functioning of the brain, immune and nervous systems, pancreas, skin, muscles and reproductive organs. New research shows adequate levels of vitamin D may help prevent high blood pressure, Alzheimer’s disease, autoimmune diseases, depression and cancer.

That’s great news; however, in the Archives of Internal Medicine, researchers from Harvard University and the University of Colorado found 70 percent of Caucasians, 90 percent of Hispanics and 97 percent of African-Americans had what was considered inadequate levels of vitamin D. These are shocking numbers—and these percentages are much higher than a similar study conducted several years ago. Many believe the change is due to the fact people are spending more time indoors and wearing high-SPF sunscreen when they go outdoors.

What does staying indoors have to do with vitamin D? First of all, vitamin D is seldom found naturally in foods; its main sources are fish liver oil, beef liver and egg yolks, as well as fortified milk and sometimes in breakfast cereals, orange juice and yogurt.

To compensate, the body can make vitamin D through a process that begins with the skin’s exposure to ultraviolet rays in sunlight. Technically, those with fair skin can make all the vitamin D they need from only 15 minutes of sun exposure, while those with darker skin may need up to five times as much time. (These times were determined with hands and arms exposed, without sunscreen.) Additionally, the season, your latitude and the weather can all affect the quality of sunlight.

What should you do with this information? If you are concerned you might be vitamin-D deficient, get a simple blood test done at your physician’s office. In order to make sure you’re getting enough vitamin D, you may want to devote some time every day to being outside. Not only will you be making vitamin D, but being outside in nature can lift your spirits and be healthful for the entire body. Many people also take a vitamin D supplement for insurance.

What kind of supplement should you look for? It’s always a good idea to look for a supplement verified by a program like United States Pharmacopeia (USP). Dietary supplements are not
regulated by the Food and Drug Administration or U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and this voluntary testing helps to ensure you get a high-quality product.

If you decide to spend more time in the sunshine or take a supplement, check with your health-care provider before starting any new regimen.

Next, you want to look for a reasonable amount. The Institute of Medicine’s Food and Nutrition Board establishes an “Adequate Intake” (AI) that represents an amount that has been found sufficient in healthy people. The AI for vitamin D is 5 micrograms (200 International Units, or IU) for men and women ages 19 to 50 and 10 micrograms (400 IU) for both men and women ages 51 to 70.

I generally advise people to look for a supplement close to the AI or lower. Remember, you also get vitamin D from the sun, fortified foods and possibly if you take a multivitamin. Additionally, more is not necessarily better. Vitamin D is a fat-soluble vitamin, meaning it is stored in the body. This makes vitamin D especially at risk for being consumed at toxic levels. Too much vitamin D can cause calcium deposits in tissues (including the arteries, leading to hardening and other cardiovascular problems) and kidney stones.

You will often find vitamin D paired with calcium; this is a great idea, especially for women, as vitamin D and calcium work as a team for bone health. However, don’t expect vitamin D to be the cure-all for all of your problems. Healthy nutrition is about balance.

If you decide to spend more time in the sunshine or take a supplement, check with your health care provider before starting any new regimen. You should also know that in light of this new information, the Food and Nutrition Board is currently reviewing its recommendations on vitamin D, with results expected to be announced in 2010.
Balancing act

Throughout the years there have been several different nutrition trends—low fat, low carb, high protein—how do we know what we’re supposed to do? The Food and Nutrition Board developed the Acceptable Macronutrient Distribution Ranges (AMDRs) for the healthy adult. An ideal balance is 20 to 35 percent of total calories from fat, 45 to 65 percent of total calories from carbohydrates and 10 to 35 percent of total calories from protein. The National Academy of Sciences believes this is the ideal balance to provide essential vitamins and minerals and prevent chronic diseases.

You’ll notice there is flexibility in these numbers; this is because everyone has their own unique metabolism and needs. For example, endurance athletes may need more carbohydrates, while a pregnant woman may need more protein.

A great way to apply this information is to follow the food guide pyramid. You probably remember the food pyramid from health class—with grains and starches on the bottom, fruits and vegetables next highest, dairy, meat and beans on top of that, and then added sugars and fats to be used sparingly. Often overlooked, this really is a great tool, and by following it and making wise choices within each group—by choosing whole grains, for example, and eating a variety of colorful fruits and veggies—you should fit within the AMDRs as well as meet your needs for most vitamins, minerals and fiber.

While the food guide pyramid still works great, it recently received a face-lift: It now includes physical activity, and emphasizes healthy choices within each group. The USDA’s website, www.mypyramid.gov, offers many interactive tools to help you determine an appropriate balance for your weight, height, activity level and weight goals.

Another way to see if you’re on track with the AMDRs is to visit one of my favorite websites, www.fitday.com, which has an online tool where you can enter all the foods you’ve eaten in a day and it provides graphs of your macronutrient balance, as well as how you’re doing with all of your micronutrients, or vitamins and minerals.

You need fat

In the AMDRs, a healthy adult should have fat providing 20 to 35 percent of total calories. This might seem like a large amount, as over the years, fat has received a bad rap. However, fat is essential for life. It protects your internal...
organs, is needed to make hormones and bile, and is a component of the brain, nerves and every cell. It also provides insulation and long-term energy, and makes you feel fuller longer, which helps reduce cravings and overeating.

Remember how vitamin D is fat-soluble? Well, we need fat to be able to digest vitamins. The right types of fat, in the right amount, are a friend, not a foe, to your health.

Visit www.massagemag.com/nutritionwebsites to find out which online tools Lauren Obermann Dauro recommends.

You are probably aware of the harmful fats—both saturated and trans fats have been shown to increase LDL (bad cholesterol), therefore increasing your risk of heart disease.

Saturated fat is found mainly in animal products, such as dairy, butter, pork and beef. It is also found in coconut and palm oils. This type of fat should be eaten sparingly.

Trans fats are found in many convenience foods, such as snack cakes, cookies, crackers, doughnuts, shortening and margarine. Be sure you read the product’s label, as anything with “partially hydrogenated” in the ingredients contains trans fats, even if the top portion of the label might say “0 grams of fat.” Food companies are allowed to put “0” on the package if the product contains 0.5 grams or less in a serving. However, little amounts add up, and this dangerous fat can do a lot of damage.

Now the good news: Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats can actually lower your risk of heart disease. Monounsaturated fats are found in olive and canola oils, as well as avocados, nuts and seeds. Polyunsaturated fats, which are found in vegetable oils as well as some nuts and seeds, are also a good choice. One type of polyunsaturated fat, in particular—omega-3 fatty acids—stands out.

Omega-3s are believed to reduce inflammation throughout the body, enhance immune function, improve arthritis symptoms, prevent heart disease and improve learning ability in children. Omega-3s are also breaking new ground in mental health: Inadequate amounts of omega-3s have been linked to depression and other mental disorders.

While there is currently no recommended dietary allowance for omega-3s, the American Dietetic Association recommends eating at least two servings of fatty fish a week. Mercury is a concern in fatty fish, so choose lower-mercury fish, such as tuna (not albacore), salmon, pollock and catfish. Wild-caught fish has been found to contain more healthful fats than farm-raised fish. Omega-3s can also be found in flaxseeds, flaxseed oil and walnuts; flaxseed and fish-oil supplements are also available.

To incorporate these healthy fats into your diet, try olive or canola oil instead of butter for cooking. Also, consider replacing red meats with fish or nut butters. Try dipping your bread in olive oil instead of using butter.

But remember, while some fats are healthy, they are still calorie dense, so make sure to watch your portion sizes.

More information

Outside of the topics covered in this article, there is still an overabundance of nutrition information available—and much of it is misleading. There is no quick fix or single solution for healthy nutrition—it’s all about balance and making wise choices.

It’s an old saying, but it’s true: “You are what you eat.” Make wise choices, and watch your energy and stamina improve.

Lauren Obermann Dauro is a registered and licensed dietitian, and assistant professor of holistic nutrition at Clayton College of Natural Health (CCNH). Founded in 1980, CCNH originated the first formalized distance education course of study grounded in natural health and holistic nutrition in the U.S. The college offers bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate degrees as well as certificate programs. For more information, visit www.ccnh.edu.