

## Reversing the Physical Damage of Alcoholism

review by Irene Allegger

***Eating for Recovery*** by Molly Siple, MS, RD

Published by Da Capo Press; www.dacapopress.com

Quality Softcover; c. 2008; \$17.95; 326 pp.

A large study conducted by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, published in 2006, concluded that “people who drink the most, even infrequently, have the poorest eating habits.” It’s estimated that among Americans who drink too much, one-fifth to one-half of their total daily intake of calories is contributed by alcohol, leading to serious nutritional deficiencies. These nutritional deficiencies are rarely addressed, making *Eating for Recovery* especially valuable.

Excessive alcohol damages the liver, and over two million Americans suffer from alcohol-related liver disease. It’s not the alcohol itself that does the damage, but something called acetaldehyde. This is the substance that results from the body metabolizing the alcohol. Acetaldehyde is highly toxic, even carcinogenic, spewing out free radicals that damage cells and cause premature aging.

In the chapter “Alcohol and Ailments,” the author discusses the many physical impacts on the body, including degeneration of the nervous system and depression. A study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1997 concluded that binge drinkers, for instance, “were at a higher risk of heart attack and other major coronary events than were abstainers even when [the] overall volume of drinking was low.”

In a well thought-out format, the author begins with a general discussion of diet; goes on to list essential vitamins and minerals, foods that target specific ailments, and foods that keep blood sugar levels steady; and soon moves into a detailed discussion of the digestive tract, a common area of complaint in alcoholics. Acute gastritis is associated with heavy drinking, and most alcoholics suffer from a variety of digestive problems, including acid reflux, overgrowth of intestinal bacteria, and diarrhea.

The seven goals of eating for recovery are kept simple and basic, geared to replenish nutrients and help the liver to detox:

1. Eat three meals a day, especially breakfast.
2. Have more fruits and vegetables.
3. Favor whole foods.
4. Stay away from junk foods.
5. Cut back on caffeine.
6. Make sure to eat a balance of healthy oils.
7. Choose more organic ingredients.

Many recovering alcoholics chow down on high-fat foods and sugary items as a reward for not drinking. The immediate goals here are to cut back on junk food and

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caffeine (often a substitute addiction). Each of these seven goals is expanded upon, explaining the rationale for each dietary step in understandable language. Some nutritionists might feel these goals are too simple and too general, but I would disagree. Alcoholism is a tough addiction (probably because our society is awash in alcohol), and the idea of eating certain kinds of foods might seem foreign to many. I like the simpler approach to diet and nutrition, which makes it easier to make the changes.

The mainstay of *Eating for Recovery* is the daily eating plan, listing 21 menus as suggestions for the three meals a day. Each of the menus is discussed in terms of nutrition, the benefits of the foods, the vitamins and minerals present, and even methods of preparing these foods. The book offers a sidebar that shows the specific recovery benefits.

Following the menus are about 120 pages of mouthwatering recipes – remember, this author is a dietitian! All the recipes feature important recovery foods – ingredients that help repair damage to the various body systems. For example, Egg Drop Soup and Carrot Slaw help the liver to mend; Chicken Curry is good for the heart; and Grilled Salmon with Toasted Corn and Lima Bean Salad helps the brain to recover.

A short chapter on “Enhancing Recovery with Nutritional Supplements” lists some basic supplements, some of which correct nutrient deficiencies, while others help the system to detox. These include zinc, magnesium, vitamin A, B-complex, antioxidants, carnitine, glutamine, probiotics, and the herb silymarin, a well-researched herbal treatment for liver disease.

For most alcoholics, recovery will depend greatly on how well they nourish themselves; just eating three meals a day and adding some fruits and vegetables to their diet would be a huge step towards feeling better and repairing the damage from alcohol. I applaud Ms. Siple for creating a very practical, yet scientific, guide for recovering alcoholics.

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