

[IMAGE]

Don't Fill Up on Empty Calories

By Dr. Donald L. Hayes

Many of the health risks people face today are a direct consequence of eating too much processed, vitamin- and mineral-deficient foods high in calories. In general, these foods are best described as containing "empty calories." Here's why empty calories are so dangerous and some common-sense steps to eliminate them from your diet.

Empty Calories: High in Calories, Low in Nutritional Value

Scientists throughout the world agree there are at least 40 nutrients that are essential to human health.

Research shows that many people are woefully deficient in a number of these key nutrients. According to a report released several years ago by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Dietary Guidelines Scientific Advisory Committee, *more than half* of Americans don't get enough calcium, vitamin E, fiber and potassium, and a majority of adults are deficient in vitamins A and C and magnesium. This is significant because provocative scientific evidence suggests that getting enough and the proper balance of necessary nutrients offers significant protection against weight gain, premature aging and other dangerous chronic diseases.

Potato Chips - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark All anyone has to do is look at the nation's expanding waistlines to know that deficiencies in nutrients are not due to the fact that we don't get enough to eat. The real culprit is the poor nutritional quality of what we eat - foods overloaded with calories and deficient in nutrition. In short, many of us are overfed but undernourished because we eat too many *empty calories*.

In order to eliminate empty calories from your diet, you first need to know if you're eating them. The term *empty calories* refers to a group of foods that provide little to no nutritional value, yet still have calories in them - typically a lot of calories! That makes the term a bit deceiving, because the calories in these types of foods are actually anything but "empty." A typical selection of empty-calorie foods includes cakes, pies, beer, soft drinks, candy and French fries.

Since you must get the 40 essential nutrients to maintain good health, your body needs you to take in a certain amount of calories each day. However, if you eat more calories than your body can use, you will gain weight and may inherit all the well-known consequences that go along with obesity. And if you eat too few nutrients (nutrient deficiency), you may have health problems caused by a lack of necessary vitamins and minerals and possible malnutrition.

How to Eliminate Empty Calories From Your Diet

Go slow. Your primary strategy should involve slowly switching from consuming empty calories to eating more nutrient-dense foods. I emphasize the importance of making slow, gradual changes; if you make too many changes too fast, you will never be able to stick to it. Make one change a week and try to maintain it. For instance, many people find it easy as a first step to drink a nutrient-dense meal replacement shake for breakfast. If you do, make sure you choose one that is truly "nutrient dense" and not "calorie dense." When in doubt about which shake is best, always ask your health care provider for a recommendation.

Be smart when it comes to the food you eat. Gradually eliminate all foods made with high levels of sugar and white flour. Deep-fried foods, processed foods, and foods high in saturated and trans fats should also be gradually eliminated from your diet. Do it slowly, but remain determined to improve your long-term state of wellness. It's OK to have an occasional treat from these food types, but they should be a rare exception to your nutrient-dense, balanced diet.

Your best friends are fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are true miracle foods. If your idea of a vegetable is French fries and you're idea of fruit is a glass of orange juice, you've got a lot to learn. A growing body of evidence shows that eating real fruits and vegetables is absolutely critical to good health. Start by eating something familiar such as cucumbers, peppers or tomatoes. Enjoy oranges, bananas, grapes, watermelons and apples. Vegetables such as celery and carrot sticks make good substitutes for chips. Fruits can easily satisfy a sweet tooth. When you get accustomed to eating familiar types of both, you can get more adventurous with many other types. Here's a few suggestions to help you eat more fruits and vegetables:

- *Buy pre-cut fruits and vegetables.* They may cost a bit more than unprepared fruits and vegetables, but they're ready to eat. This is particularly important on those days when you're rushing around and have limited time to prepare meals and snacks.

- *Eat fruits and vegetables at every meal.* For snacks, try raisins or apple slices. Easy to prepare and package, low in calories and high in nutrition.
- *Keep fruits and vegetables at eye level in the refrigerator or on the counter.* Make them easy to find and you'll be more likely to eat them.
- *Skip the potatoes.* They have a high glycemic index compared to other vegetables such as string beans, broccoli, asparagus, cauliflower or peas.

Other Helpful Hints

Replace soft drinks with water. Instead of getting a soft drink (a classic example of empty calories) every time you are thirsty, drink water. If you are really addicted to these types of drinks - and many people are - try to at least alternate between soft drinks and water, particularly while you're transitioning from empty calories to better ones. Better yet, don't wait until you're thirsty. Since you need to drink 6-8 glasses of water every day (64 oz), drink water every few hours, keeping in mind that soft drinks don't count toward that number.

Family eating - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark *Read all food labels very carefully.* There are plenty of deceptive products out there; fruit juices are a good example. You think because it has a word like "fruit" that it has to be good for you. Not necessarily so. Almost all commercially prepared fruit juices contain high-fructose corn syrup, which from a nutritional point of view is the same as sugar. It also means that they are nutritionally dead (unless the manufacturer happens to add a few vitamins) and don't have the nutrients that are so abundant in fresh fruit. To maximize wellness, you need to learn to read and understand food labels; that way, you'll understand what you're putting in your body and whether its nutritive or not.

Breakfast calories are the most important. Research conducted at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine concluded that eating breakfast, particularly if it contains some protein, can hold off hunger for hours. Your body converts the amino acids from protein into blood sugar that act as tiny time-release energy capsules, which can keep you from overeating for the remainder of the day. This important study also made a number of other interesting observations about the value of a healthy breakfast, which are a perfect way to wrap up our discussion of empty calories and leave you with some take-home points to consider:

- Breakfast eaters are less likely to choose "high-calorie junk food" during the remainder of the day.
- Calorie-dense nutrients consumed at breakfast may make it easier to perform physical activity.
- Breakfast eaters engage in more physical exercise than non-eaters.
- Eating breakfast regularly may stimulate low-calorie, low-fat eating habits.

Remember that deficiencies in nutrients do not occur because we don't get enough to eat. The real culprit is the poor nutritional quality of what we eat, foods overloaded with calories and deficient in nutrition; in short - *too many empty calories and not enough nutrition*. Talk to your doctor for more information.

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