

■ NUTRITION



CONSUMING a variety of fresh vegetables, fruit, pulses and whole grains is crucial to keeping in optimal physical and mental shape. | SUPPLIED

You really are what you eat

Food fuels your physical processes and those of your gut microbes

VIWE NDONGENI-NTELEBI

FOOD, glorious food.

That sums up the emotions we have when we look at food. It fuels our bodies with the energy and nutrients needed to function properly. But if we don't give our bodies the right food, our metabolic processes suffer and our health declines.

The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA) says the importance of eating the right food cannot be overemphasized. ADSA spokesperson and registered dietitian, Nathalie Mat, says almost all of the nutrients our body needs to stay healthy come from what we eat and drink.

"The human body is an incredible walking bag of chemical reactions working together. If we don't take in the nutrients we need from our diet, some of that chemistry starts to function less well.

"Eating the right food for our body helps us to perform well mentally and physically, whether at work or when exercising. Eating the right nutrients means we will be able to have healthy babies when we want to have children and it means we will age well and live a long life to watch our children grow. What we eat helps shape how we age.

"We're learning more and more about the bacteria that live in our digestive system and the roles they play in our health. The food we feed



ENCOURAGE loved ones to eat optimally.

ourselves not only affects our health, but also the health of the bacteria in our digestive system. One of the best ways to keep both ourselves and our bacteria happy is to eat a diet that includes a variety of fresh produce, whole grains, lean animal products and heart-healthy plant fats."

It's been medically proven that certain types of disease can be genetically passed on down generations.

However, Mat says, just because parents have a disease doesn't mean their off-spring will definitely develop the same condition.

"Certain patterns of eating like the Mediterranean diet are associated with lower rates of disease like cancer, diabetes and heart disease," she said.

The Mediterranean diet focuses on fresh produce, whole grains, fish at

least twice a week, legumes such as lentils, chickpeas and other beans, and nuts also eaten at least twice a week. Red meat is limited. If alcohol is consumed, it's in moderation. Sugars and refined starchy foods are eaten in small quantities.

Juliet Fearnhead, a Pick n Pay dietitian, agrees. She says the link between good nutrition, exercise and overall health is too important to ignore.

Similar to physical activity, making small, positive changes to what food goes into the body every day has a great impact on your overall health.

By taking steps to eat healthier, one can significantly lower their risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Here are some steps you can follow:

- Eat more vegetables and fruit;
- Choose whole grains for fibre;
- Focus on including healthy fats;
- Include fish, skinless chicken, lean meat and eggs;
- Enrich meals with beans and legumes;
- Reduce salt and sugar intake; and
- Drink more fluids, especially water.

Mat adds that exercise should be part of a healthy lifestyle – ideally adults should be moving their bodies for 30 minutes five days a week.

It also goes without saying that sleep – seven to nine hours – is vital.