

Good nutrition, a priority during Covid-19

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The global pandemic has stripped daily life down to the essentials, and we find ourselves under lockdown restrictions with our thoughts and actions around food set in a very different context to anything we have known before. As it grows ever clearer that the threat of Covid-19 will be with us for quite some time and restrictions will be ongoing, optimising our family's health now is top of mind for many. Generally, South African families are now home together for an extended period of time. There's more opportunity to shift into healthy habits like cooking nutritious meals together, making healthy snacks and drinks available in the home and being physically active as a family on a daily basis.



“If it’s not already a focus of family life, this is actually an ideal time to prioritise nutrition and health,” says Retha Harmse, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for ADSA (Association for Dietetics in South Africa). “As lockdown restriction levels fluctuate; we will have more freedom of movement, but also more risks of contracting Covid-19. Eating a balanced diet plays an important role in maintaining health and supporting the immune system, as well as all the body’s vital systems.”

A balanced diet is the best immune support

The media, especially social media, are rife at the moment with information-sharing about Covid-19, and there’s a lot of ‘advice’ and recommendations that are not evidence-based. A feature of the Covid-19 fake news has been the touting of various foods, medicinally-used plants or nutritional supplements as ‘immune-boosters’, treatments or even ‘cures’. Retha says, “Of course, everyone would like to minimise their risk for contracting Covid-19, however, there is no simple quick fix to boost our immune system to guarantee that we won’t be infected. Simply put, you cannot ‘boost’ your immune system through diet, and no specific food or supplement will prevent you contracting Covid-19. Good hygiene practice and social distancing remains the best means of avoiding infection.”

There are many nutrients involved with the normal functioning of the immune system. This is why maintaining a healthy balanced diet made up of different foods that provide a spectrum of nutrients that include copper, folate, iron, selenium, zinc and vitamins A, B6, B12, C and D is the very best way to support immune function. “In addition to a healthy balanced diet, a general healthy lifestyle is also important to support your immune system,” says Retha, “This means not smoking, exercising regularly, getting adequate sleep and very importantly, minimizing stress, which is very intense at this time.”

How do we achieve a balanced diet for optimum immune support?

A well-balanced, healthy diet will provide you with all the nutrients you require to support immune functioning. Retha suggests going back to the basics of good nutrition. Here, she takes the South African Food Based Dietary Guidelines and shows where you can make some creative adjustments to fit the lockdown restrictions you might experience:

1. **Enjoy a variety of foods** - Although certain foods might be a bit harder to come by, don't fall in the trap of eating only certain foods. Variety also means including foods from two or more food groups at each meal.
2. **Be active** – Regular, moderate exercise is very beneficial for getting outdoors (if you can), stress relief and improved immune function. Try some of these lockdown ideas:
 - You don't need big spaces for cardiovascular exercise - running up and down stairs is great; as is skipping, and skipping ropes are inexpensive cardio tools
 - download exercise apps for daily workouts
 - Similarly, there are many physical activity videos, including dance, martial arts and yoga, available on YouTube and other websites
 - If you have a closed in garden or courtyard-type space, play physical games such as handball, bat and ball, mini-cricket or mini-soccer as a family or couple, combining fun, bonding and exercise
3. **Make starchy foods part of most meals** - Choose whole grain, unrefined foods to add more fibre, vitamins and minerals to your diet. Good options to choose are whole-wheat pasta, multigrain provitas or cracker breads, brown rice and bulgur wheat. Combine whole grains with other tasty, nutritious foods in mixed dishes.
4. **Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit every day**- This can be challenging while we are under lockdown and want to avoid frequent shopping. Here are some tips:
 - Choose fresh, whole fruit that is naturally longer lasting such as apples, pineapple and citrus fruits
 - Eat fruits as snacks and desserts. Add sliced fruit or dried fruit to your cereal, muesli or yoghurt
 - As some fresh vegetables don't last long, blanch or cook them on the day of purchase and then freeze for later use
 - Root and bulb veg options such as carrots and turnips, onions, garlic and ginger are longer lasting
 - Frozen and canned vegetables are also good options
5. **Eat dry beans, split peas, lentils and soya regularly** - Dried legumes are not only good substitutes for meat, fish, eggs or cheese, but can also be used as affordable 'meat extenders' to make meals go further. If you use canned legumes rinse them well after they have been drained to reduce the sodium content.
 - Mash and heat up tinned cannelloni beans as the creamy base for a pasta sauce.
 - Save on your budget and make your own humus from canned chickpeas.
 - Peanut butter can be used as a sandwich filling and can be stirred into porridge.
6. **Have milk, maas or yoghurt every day** - Maas and yoghurt will last longer in the fridge than fresh milk. For more long-term milk options buy long-life milk, skim milk powder or evaporated milk. Fresh dairy products can also be frozen. Eat yoghurt, with added fruit, as a snack between meals instead of a packet of chips as this contributes to the day's nutrient intake and does not contain excess fat and salt.
7. **Fish, chicken, lean meat or eggs can be eaten daily** –
 - Stock up on tinned fish options such as tuna, pilchards, sardines
 - Quiches and omelettes are an easy and tasty way to use up vegetables that might spoil soon
8. **Drink lots of clean, safe water** - This is perhaps the easiest time to get into the habit of drinking enough water because you are confined to one space. If water is readily available during the day, it increases consumption. Keep a water bottle on hand or a jug nearby.
9. **Use fats sparingly** - Choose vegetable oils rather than hard fats, and always use only a little, as fats are high in energy but provide relatively few nutrients.

Even for those who are still earning under the lockdown restrictions, the economic downturn is going to have an impact on the vast majority of South African households. Retha emphasises the importance of getting your household food budget under control, as this can relieve some stress. “Prioritise nutrient-dense foods that you know your family enjoys, and limit your purchases of treats, drinks and snacks that are high in calories but low in nutrients,” she says. “Meal planning, and keeping dishes simple yet nutritious, helps to reduce your food waste and gives you the peace of mind that you’re doing the best you can so that your family can maintain their health. Always remember that the best ways to stay safe are through regular, proper washing of hands, social distancing and limiting movement outside of your home.”

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