

From keeping the flu bug away to improving your digestion, there seems to be a pill or two you can pop in the name of better health. The irony is, the more affluent we are, the less nutritious our diets become. In the most recent 2004 National Nutrition Survey by the Health Promotion Board, it was found that more than 36 per cent of women aged 19 to 65 are not meeting the recommended intake of iron. In addition, 56 per cent are not taking enough calcium, while 12 per cent are not consuming enough vitamin A.

But the good thing is, even if you think your diet isn't very balanced, you might not actually be doing too poorly. "You can eat lots of fruits and vegetables one day, and not much the next. But over the week, you'll still get the right amount of nutrients," says Nehal Kamdar, dietitian from Raffles Hospital.

If you're planning to top up your nutritional needs with vitamin tablets, do check in with a doctor first, says Natalie Goh, dietitian from Peaches & Pear Nutrition Consultancy. You may end up doing more harm than good to your health, especially if you are on medication or have a chronic illness.

For a start, find out what nutrients you are missing in your diet. See if you fit into one of the three common lifestyle profiles here, and find out what the experts recommend.



LIFESTYLE #1:

"I AM A MULTI-TASKER IN THE OFFICE."

For more than eight hours a day, you are juggling a variety of things in the office. Presentations, proposals, e-mails, telephone calls... there are days when you wish you had 48 hours a day.

PILE ON THE FIBRE

A lack of fibre, common in an instant-food diet, can lead to constipation and piles. So when deciding what to eat for lunch, opt for wholegrains such as brown rice, cereal and barley. Hankering for a snack during office hours? Make it a piece of fresh fruit to help you meet your vitamin and fibre needs. One serving (and you need two a day) is equivalent to an apple, a medium banana, a wedge of papaya, or a wedge of watermelon. Another fibre-rich snack to munch on is a serving of unsweetened wholegrain cereal.

THE "FATS" BEHIND OFFICE FATIGUE

That half-eaten curry puff in your hand could be causing your sluggishness at work. As cholesterol travels in your bloodstream, and fatty deposits build up in your arteries, it affects your blood circulation, says Natalie. That, in turn, can lead to fatigue and affect your alertness. If you have a serious case of the munchies, reach for a banana or yogurt instead.

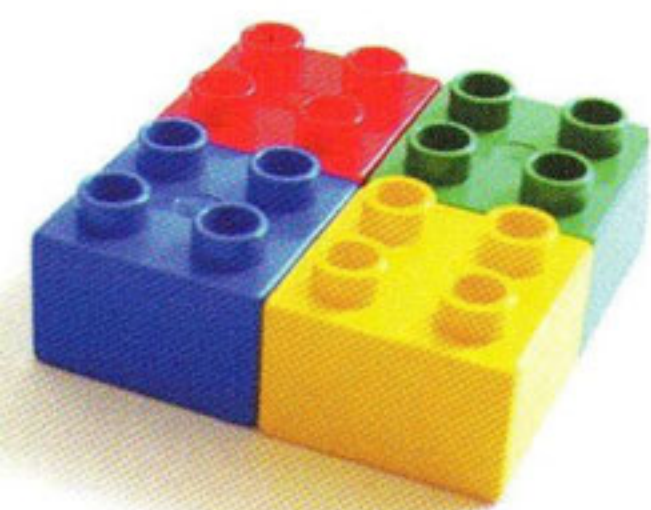
SHARPEN YOUR MIND

To banish mid-day sleepiness, try ginseng tea, says Natalie. "From a TCM perspective, ginseng is good for promoting blood circulation. This can boost alertness," she says. For a memory boost at lunch, order dishes with meat, fish, milk, egg yolk, or nuts to stock up on choline, a nutrient that has been found to improve mental function, says Natalie.

EYE FOOD

If staring at the computer all day leaves your peepers tired and strained, it may do you good to take foods that are packed with lutein, an antioxidant that is concentrated on the retina and lens of the eye. According to the National Eye Institute in the US, there is a link between lutein and a decreased risk of eye disease. Go for green, leafy vegetables such as spinach, as well as tomatoes and carrots, suggests Natalie.

***Eat these daily:** Lutein (5-30mg); ginkgo biloba (20-50mg).



LIFESTYLE #2:

"MY HANDS ARE FULL WITH CHILDREN AND CHORES."

Being a stay-at-home mother does not mean you have the luxury of time. Between cleaning the house, and taking care of the kids, you have precious little time for everything else – your diet included.

BONE UP

Try taking a general multi-vitamin if you are worried about not getting enough nutrients, suggests Natalie. Also, given the statistics that most women in Singapore are not taking enough calcium, it is a good idea to increase your intake of this mineral. Find it in dairy products like milk, yogurt, cheese, and dark green leafy greens like spinach, bak choy and kai lan.

JOINT VENTURE

Bending over to mop the floor, or lifting up your kids can strain your joints. Age is not friendly on them either; joints get less mobile and can also be plagued by problems like gout and arthritis. If popping glucosamine pills isn't your cup of tea, Jaclyn Reutens, dietitian from Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants, suggests foods that are high in omega-3 fatty acids. "These help reduce inflammation, and are found in salmon, tuna, walnuts, flaxseed, and canola oil," she says.

CATCH UP

Keeping up with active tykes can be tiring. To maintain your energy levels, include more B-vitamins in your diet as these are necessary for the release of energy from carbohydrates. You can find the various B-vitamins in foods such as dairy products, poultry, meat and fish, says Nehal.

***Get these daily:** B-vitamins, not more than 50mg; calcium, 800mg; omega-3 fatty acids, 1-2g



LIFESTYLE #3:

"I AM A WEEKEND WARRIOR."

You sprint for the gym or the great outdoors after work and during weekends. Hitting a personal best in your next race gives you a high. What should you eat to keep yourself in tip-top shape?

IRON, WOMAN

A recreational female athlete is at a slight risk of becoming iron deficient, says Jaclyn. "Some iron is lost from the body each day, more during menstruation. And for women who run long distances, some red blood cells are destroyed every time the feet hit the ground during running," she says. If you are constantly feeling weak and tired, are not performing well at work, and have a low immune system, these could be symptoms of iron deficiency. Try eating iron-rich food that's also rich in vitamin C. For a quick snack, reach for prunes and raisins, suggests Jaclyn. Otherwise, gulp down a mug of iron-rich 3-in-1 Milo, with a handful of vitamin C-packed berries.

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CARBS FOR PERFORMANCE

A low-carb diet and active lifestyle don't go together. The lack of carbohydrates will lead to low muscle glycogen and blood sugar levels – the very sources of fuel for your body. You could end up feeling tired, dizzy and hungry, which will affect your performance. "Don't be an anti-carbohydrates fan if you want to maximise your workout," says Jaclyn. "Take good carbs, which are found in wholegrain and wholemeal breads, rice, noodles, pasta and potatoes. Keep them low-fat and you'll be leaping over the wall!" she says.

To get your energy and not the kilos, Jaclyn recommends taking no more than five servings (if you exercise less than three times a week at 30 minutes each) to seven servings (if you exercise an hour every day) of