

DIET DILEMMAS

By Ally Soriano

With the coming of the new year returns all the half-hearted pledges to lose weight and forced promises to swear off junk food (seriously who even thought that was a good idea?), all of which we abandoned at the start of the last new year. However, no matter how much you pretend it's funny every time you see you're getting just that much pudgier (calling yourself thicc doesn't justify anything), the nagging voice in the back of your head which may or may not be your mom telling you to get fit just doesn't go away. And deep down you know she's right.

So hide away those fast food coupons and tighten your belts to their original size, because this is the year we get serious. If you're already eating a mix of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, then congratulations you already have the foundation of a healthy diet. However, even if you're eating according to plan, are at a healthy weight, and haven't seen the junk food aisle for what feels like a millenia, there's still a chance you're fibbing up on some of your food choices without even knowing it.

1. Dark, leafy greens vs. canned veggies

You'd be wrong if you thought Granny was just talking about vegetables in general when she told you to eat your greens. She was literally telling us to eat the dark, leafy ones like spinach (sponsored by Popeye), romaine, turnips and kale (no hipster jokes please) which are packed with vitamins and minerals.

On the other hand, anything that comes in a can is usually stripped bare of its fiber and nutrients while being chock-full of sodium. If you're resorting to canned vegetables due to convenience, it's best to turn to frozen ones instead. They're just as healthy as fresh and are less wasteful since you can take what you want and chuck the rest back into the freezer.

2. Cruciferous vegetables vs. starchy vegetables

Don't be fazed by the intimidating name, cruciferous just means anything that's related to your friendly neighborhood cabbage. Fresh from the Cabbage Patch, cabbages (obviously), broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflowers are packed with antioxidants and are even help reduce cancer risks.

When the heavens made vegetables, we assumed they'd more or less be created equally. There is such a thing however as lesser ones. Case and point: corn, peas, potatoes, pumpkin, squash, and yams; all of which tend to contain fewer vitamins,

minerals, and fiber than other types of vegetables as well as containing two to three times as many calories.

3. Simply cooked beans vs. canned baked beans

As alien as they may seem, beans are surprisingly good for your health. Chickpeas, black beans, and pinto beans are all filling and fiber-rich. Unlike canned vegetables, canned beans can be a healthy addition to your meals as long as you rinse them before eating to prevent taking in any extra sodium.

What is probably the most devastating entry on this list, canned baked beans. Oh the humanity, no longer can we enjoy its sweet-saucy tang free of guilt. Unfortunately containing more sugar and sodium than regular canned kidney or white beans, this also applies to canned bean soups; albeit containing more fiber and protein. It's best to stick to regular beans and adding homemade tomato sauce.

4. Fresh or frozen fruits vs. canned or dried fruits

Avocados and berries (blue, black, rasp, and straw) are some of the best fruits you can take a liking to. They offer heart-healthy fats and nutrients, as well as antioxidants and vitamins for low amounts of calories. And like vegetables, it's best to take them frozen if you can't get them fresh.

Sugar is such a cruel mistress. So tempting and yet so deceitful. Finding its ways into even the most unsuspecting of fruits. Being naturally sweet, fruit hardly needs any added sugar, sweeteners, and "sugar-based" flavor enhancers that we find in the canned, dried, and even processed juice kind. Even juicing a whole fruit concentrates its sugars and often gets rid of the fiber.

5. Whole grains vs. refined grains

Contrary to what some believe, eliminating grains for your diet and health improvement is not the best course of action (unless you have celiac disease or a gluten intolerance) you should actually be eating them everyday as they're full of fiber, plant-based protein, vitamins, and minerals.

Another pernicious food staple, refined grains like white bread, pasta, rice, crackers, and pretzels have sugars that are absorbed into the bloodstream faster, often causing a spike in blood sugar levels. One way to differentiate whether something is whole or refined grain is if the first word on its label is whole. If not, the first ingredient might be wheat, meaning it's a refined grain with less nutrition.

6. Oatmeal vs. cereal

You can almost hear the drawn-out whines of “But, Mooom~” that kids have let out at being coerced into eating healthy Oaty-O’s. Fact of the matter is oats are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, folate, fiber, and potassium, naturally making them a hearty food that lowers cholesterol and burns fat. Make sure to steer clear of the packaged versions though which are swimming in added sugar. Opt for plain oats with some fruit or honey.

Kiss your friendly Fruit Loops goodbye, because sugary cereals of it’s like are, well, sugary. And if we’ve learned anything through the course of this article it’s that too much sugar is bad. If you truly can’t escape from their sweet embrace, try eating half a bowl of your high-sugar cereal and half low-sugar cereal to balance it out.

7. Greek yogurt vs. flavored yogurts

Don’t raise your eyebrows at me, this isn’t some high-brow, exclusive food to be scoffed at. Greek yogurt has twice the protein of regular yogurt which keeps you full longer and also being a good source of calcium. Besides being delicious and an easy to make snack, it can also replace mayonnaise or sour cream in your favorite recipes.

Following the lead of processed fruit drinks, flavored yogurts also contain a large amount of sugar. Whether it be the regular, drinkable, or squeezable kind, each contains more calorie than protein. Going for yogurt can also take away the satisfaction that comes from chewing your food and will leave you feeling unfull which will consequently have you hungrier, sooner.

8. Cottage cheese vs. processed cheese

An odd but versatile dairy contender similar to Greek yogurt, cottage cheese is a good choice for those who want to limit the amount of carbs they take in. This hefty concoction of versatility can be put into smoothies and pancakes alike for a filling meal.

The second most devastating entry on this list, processed cheeses are predictably high in sodium. Bid farewell to the days when you could feel like you actually had your life together whenever you put together a sandwich easy by laying a cheese slice flat on some bread with mayo.

9. Fish and chicken vs. processed and red meats

No matter how pesky those tuna and chicken commercials are with their fit celebrity endorsers and catchy theme music, they do actually have a point. Like it says on the tin, fish are full of omega-3 fatty acids and nutrients. Meanwhile, chicken of the skinless sort is packed with protein, low in calories, and helps your immune system.

For the final stage of our war against processed food, meat takes its place as the hardest boss. Setting our sights on red meats (beef, pork, and lamb) and processed meats like hot dogs, sausages, and other cured selections, we expose them for their fat-filled, salt-heavy hides. Not to mention the extra cholesterol and preservatives that hide in the recesses of their meaty goodness.

10. Eggs, Nuts and Tofu

While these foods are good for you and don't necessarily come with an evil counterpart, they do have their drawbacks once eaten in excess. Egg yolks are rich in Vitamin C and contributes to brain health. It's recommended to enjoy them only around 3 times a week to keep your cholesterol levels at bay.

Nuts are more little nutrient bombs that'll give you heart-healthy fats, protein, vitamins, and minerals. Steer clear from their packaged or oil-roasted brethren however and stick to eating them raw or dry-roasted. Take care as well not to eat too much as this could lead to weight gain or digestive issues.

Finally, my personal favorite, tofu. A familiar friend to vegans and vegetarians, tofu is the wonder food that makes a good plant-based protein and a substitute for meat. It benefits heart health and even cancer protection. Be wary though as eating too much could result in a messed-up menstrual cycle, lower fertility, and an increased risk of rheuma.

And there you have it. I hope these food facts helped fill in a piece or two of the puzzle on how to look like you came straight out of Baywatch (no money-back guarantees). Coupled with a healthy mindset and exercise regime, you'll be that much closer to making Momma proud. *Go get 'em, tiger.*

SOURCES:<http://www.health.com/food/best-worst-food-choices#best-worst-food-groups-frozen-berries>