Women, Nutrition, & Reproductive Health

Nutrition plays an important role in women’s health. Below are 5 nutritional strategies to promote optimal reproductive and metabolic functioning:

1. Maintain a healthy weight and amount of body fat.
Body fat produces hormones that regulate reproduction (e.g. leptin and estrogen). Too little body fat decreases levels of these hormones, while too much body fat increases levels of these hormones. In either case, hormonal imbalances impair menstrual regularity and ovulation.

2. Stay in “energy balance.”
For optimal reproductive functioning, women need to get enough “energy” from food, sleep, and relaxation to balance their energy expenditure from exercise, daily activities, and stress. If the balance is thrown off, the brain shuts down metabolic and reproductive hormones (including thyroid hormone, growth hormone, and estrogen). This stops ovulation and menstruation and causes a loss of bone mass. To stay in energy balance…

- Fuel your body with nourishing foods every 3-5 hours. That means taking the time for 3 balanced meals plus 1-3 snacks daily.
- Accumulate 60 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week (this includes walking around campus, doing housework, and playing actively with children). For optimal fitness, enjoy 30-60 minutes of more intense physical activities 3-5 times per week (but keep in mind that more is NOT better – too much exercise is an “energy drain”).
- Plan to get 7-9 hours of sleep most nights. To help ensure restful sleep, avoid stressful activities right before bed and avoid caffeinated products at least 5 hours before bed.
- Take steps to manage stress every day. Take deep breaths, practice yoga or meditation, write in a journal, or talk to friends.

3. Take a simple multivitamin/mineral supplement every day.
Even if you eat well most of the time, a simple multi is a good idea for all women of reproductive age. A multi will provide 100% of the daily value for folic acid (a B vitamin that is critical at the moment of conception before a woman knows she’s pregnant to prevent birth defects). A multi provides extra levels of vitamins and minerals that are commonly reduced by the Pill and vitamin B6 and magnesium that may help prevent or decrease PMS symptoms. Centrum (or any store’s generic version of Centrum) is a good, inexpensive choice.
4. Consider calcium.
Most multi’s don’t supply enough of this bone-building mineral. And, low calcium intakes have been associated with PMS symptoms. Women need 1000 to 1300 mg of calcium daily. This can be supplied by 3-4 servings of low fat milk products or other calcium-rich foods. One serving, which provides about 300 mg of calcium, is defined as 1 cup of milk, 1 cup of calcium fortified soy milk or orange juice, 1 cup of yogurt, 1 ½ ounces of cheese, or some other fortified product that contains about 30% of the DV for calcium. If you fall short in servings, you should make up the difference with a calcium supplement. Look for a supplement with calcium citrate (e.g. Citracal) for best absorption and least digestive distress. Also, take no more than 500 mg at one time and take it separate from your multi (since iron and calcium compete for absorption).

5. Fish for health.
Fish is one of the only sources of DHA and EPA (two omega 3 fatty acids that are critical for normal brain function and heart health). Women with low levels of DHA in their bodies increase their risk for mood disorders and impair their babies’ brain and vision development during pregnancy and lactation. The International Society for the Study of Fatty Acids and Lipids recommends 220 mg DHA and 220 mg EPA per day – an amount that most women in the U.S. do not get. To optimize your levels of DHA and EPA, keep these tips in mind…

- Enjoy two 3-6 oz. cooked portions of oily fish a week. Good choices that are very rich in DHA/EPA and very low in contaminants are Alaska wild salmon or farmed rainbow trout.
- NOTE: Some fish are contaminated with high levels of mercury, PCBs, and/or dioxins that pose a serious risk for birth defects and brain damage in children. Therefore, the FDA/EPA recommends that all children and women of child-bearing age avoid swordfish, shark, tilefish, and king mackerel and eat no more than one 6 oz. can of "solid white" or two 6 oz. cans of "light" tuna per week. Food safety officials at Consumer’s Union of U.S. recommend even less “solid white” tuna.
- If you don’t eat fish, take a daily fish oil supplement with ~220 mg DHA and ~220 mg of EPA. Inexpensive, quality choices include Costco’s Kirkland Signature brand (enteric coated) or Trader Jo’s Trader Darwin’s brand – one pill of each provides 500 mg total DHA/EPA. Strict vegetarians can choose DHA only supplements made from marine algae (e.g. one pill of Expecta Lipil or two pills of Nature’s Way Neuromins provide 200 mg DHA).