

Let Food Be Thy Medicine

Nutrition counselling tips for pharmacists

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Promoting Sustainable Health and Nutrition

The Eat Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems estimated that a whole food plant-based diet (WFPBD) could prevent **11 million deaths** annually from **diet-related illnesses**.

Primary care pharmacists are trusted and well placed to deliver **basic nutrition counselling** and advocate transition towards a WFPBD for the **prevention and treatment** of chronic diseases and management of an overall **healthy lifestyle**.

Nutrition advice can help patients reduce their reliance on medications and supplements and aid in deprescribing.

Below are some tips to get you going:

Increase dietary fibre

Fibre, found exclusively in plant foods, is essential for supporting healthy and regular bowel movements, helps keep us satiated, regulates our cholesterol and hormones, and supports the health of our gut microbiome.

With many medications (antidepressants, antiepileptics, antipsychotics, opiates, diuretics, calcium and iron supplements) and diseases (hypothyroidism, irritable bowel syndrome) causing constipation, and to help reduce the use of laxatives, counselling on fibre intake is crucial.

Advise:

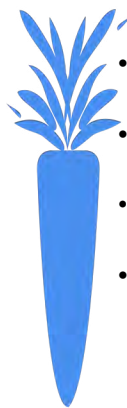
- Aim to eat at least **30g of fibre daily** by basing meals and snacks on **whole fruits, vegetables, beans, pulses and wholegrains**.
- Swap **refined grains** for **whole grains**, brown rice, whole wheat bread, pasta and couscous, bulgur and buckwheat.



Increase fruits and vegetables

Fruits and vegetables contain a variety of vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, antioxidants and fibre.

Studies have shown that people who eat plenty of **fruit and vegetables** have a **lower risk** of developing many diseases, including hypertension, obesity, cardiac disease and stroke, and some cancers (including mouth, throat, stomach, bowel and lung cancers).



Advise:

- Eat at least **five portions a day**, although **10** portions daily have additional health benefits.
- Consume a **rainbow of fruits and vegetables** to further maximise nutrient diversity.
- At each mealtime, ensure almost **half a plate** is filled with **fruits and vegetables**.
- Consider what counts as a portion.

See portion size guide: <https://plantbasedhealthprofessionals.com/wp-content/uploads/Portion-control-factsheet.pdf>

Encourage hydration

There are numerous health benefits of being sufficiently hydrated including removal of waste products, lubricating of joints, transport of nutrients, maintenance of temperature and blood pressure, as well as relief of constipation and headaches.



Advise:

- Drink about **2 to 2.5 litres of fluid a day**, although other factors such as age, physical activity, pregnancy or breastfeeding or climate can affect this.
- **Plain water** or **herbal teas** are first choice. **Tea/coffee without sugar** also counts although excess caffeine can lead to dehydration.
- **Discourage consumption of soft drinks and fruit juices** and store-bought smoothies which are laden with sugar or artificial sweetener.
- Counsel on the **negative impact of alcohol**.

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Swap animal-based proteins for plant-based proteins

Plant-based proteins such as beans, peas, chickpeas, and lentils are *healthier* than animal-based proteins because they are *low* in fat, and *high* in fibre, protein, vitamins and minerals. Other vegetable-based sources of protein include tofu, tempeh, edamame and nuts.



Advise:

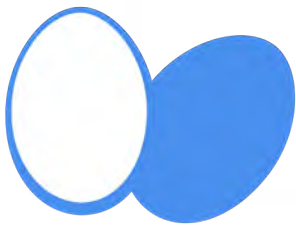
- For main meals, swap out meat for beans, pulses, lentils, or chickpeas.
- Eat a portion of raw unsalted mixed nuts *per day* (30g).
- Plant-based meat alternatives can be a *good option* for those wanting to transition to a more plant-based diet. However, they are a *processed food* and contain *high* amounts of salt, sugar, saturated fat and additives so should be restricted to *occasional use*.



Reduce dietary cholesterol and saturated fats

Counsel patients that dietary cholesterol derived from animal products like eggs, meat and dairy can *exacerbate hyperlipidaemia* and *increase risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke and dementia*.

Unsaturated fats are healthier and are predominantly from plant sources, but all fats are high in calories and should be limited in the diet.



Advise:

- Avoid or limit foods *high in cholesterol* e.g. eggs, shellfish, and offal such as liver.
- Reduce consumption of *animal products* such as meat, dairy and processed foods which contain *cholesterol* and are high in *saturated* and *trans fats*.
- Avoid or limit use of *tropical oils*, such as palm oil and coconut oil, which are high in *saturated fat*, but not cholesterol.
- Added sugar and refined grains also *increase cholesterol* levels.
- For more motivated patients, outline the *Portfolio diet* which has been shown to help reduce levels of cholesterol.
- For a good source of *alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) omega 3 fatty acids*, aim for at least *two teaspoons* (2 x 4g) of ground flaxseed or chia seeds *each day*.



Reduce sugar and refined carbohydrates

Diets high in sugars and refined carbohydrates (chocolate, cakes, biscuits, full-sugar soft drinks and ice cream) are of *limited nutritional value* and are *risk factors* for the development of type 2 diabetes, obesity and tooth decay so should be avoided or minimised.

Ideally, no more than 5% of the calories consumed should come from free sugars i.e. <30g per day

Advise:

- Consumption of simple carbohydrates and sugar *affects hyperglycaemic control* therefore *avoid* high sugar food and drinks including fruit juices.
- If desired *eat only on occasions and in limited quantities*.
- Encourage wholefood snacks that are *minimally processed* e.g. fruit, nut and seeds and hummus on toast or vegetable sticks.
- Swap *sugary drinks* for water, tea, and coffee without sugar.
- Avoid *artificial sweeteners* which have a *negative impact* on metabolism, appetite and gut bacteria, leading to a possible *increased risk* of several *chronic diseases*, including diabetes, stroke and dementia.
- Use *food labels* to choose foods *lower* in sugar.



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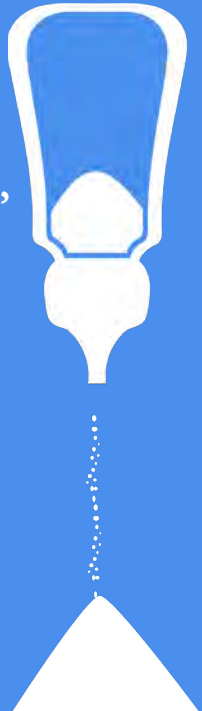


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Reduce salt consumption

Eating too much salt can raise your blood pressure, which increases your risk of developing heart disease, stroke dementia and renal failure.

Adults should eat no more than **6g (1 teaspoon)** of salt a day. If they have hypertension, they will benefit from lowering intake further.



Advise:

- **Reduce or avoid** intake of foods **high in salt** such as *anchovies, bacon, cheese, gravy granules, ham, olives, pickles, prawns, salami, salted and dry-roasted nuts, salt fish, smoked meat and fish, soy sauce, stock cubes, yeast extract.*
- **Replace** salt with *pepper, herbs, and spices* to **add flavour.**
- **Encourage** consumption of **nitrate-rich vegetables** (*rocket, spinach, beetroot*), *flaxseeds, hibiscus tea and wholegrains* which have all been shown to **reduce blood pressure.**
- **Salt is found in most foods** so **use food labels** to choose foods lower in salt. A general rule is that if the amount of salt in milligrams is **more** than the calorie content of the food, **then that's too much.**
- **Check** if patients are on **effervescent** vitamin supplements or painkillers as some of these can contain **1g salt per tablet.**

Supplements on a plant-based diet

A WFPBD is abundant in many healthy nutrients but *may be less abundant in:*

Vitamin B12

The recommended daily intake for adults is **2.4 mcg**. The ability to absorb B12 varies, particularly with age, **so advise on 25-100 mcg daily or 2000 mcg weekly.** Higher doses may be needed if over the age of 65 years.

Iodine:

The recommended amount for adults is **140 mcg per day.** *Seaweed* is a good source, but some seaweeds can have a very high amount, therefore consider a supplement.

Vitamin D

Due to varying levels of exposure, Public Health England recommend that all UK residents take **10 mcg daily supplement in the winter months (October to March).** A supplement is also necessary if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, aged 65 or over, aren't exposed to much sun. A popular request is for vegan formulations of vitamin D – **check the Plant-Based Health Professionals UK factsheet.**

The **VEG1** tablet from the **UK Vegan Society** contains *all the essential nutrients for a plant-based diet.*

Remember:

Medication is not a replacement for eating well and being physically active. And lifestyle changes can't always replace medication, even if patients follow all nutrition recommendations.

The Plant-Basted-Eatwell-Guide visually demonstrates the proportions in which foods from different food groups are required to achieve a balanced and healthy diet and is useful as a tool for nutrition counselling:

<https://plantbasedhealthprofessionals.com/wp-content/uploads/Plant-Based-Eatwell-Guide-A4.pdf>

For more factsheets with specific nutrition tips for various chronic diseases visit <https://plantbasedhealthprofessionals.com/factsheets>