

FAMILY SWIM HOLIDAY
BEST Centre, Colonia Sant Jordi, Mallorca

James Parrack's famous
Nutrition talk

We all know that the way to good health is to eat a good diet and get a little exercise, so why does it seem to be so difficult for so many of us?

Part of the reason is because the large and powerful food industry would like to us to be as confused as possible about what food actually is, part of the reason is because we are busy people and just don't have time to plan our eating the way we know we probably should. We are all being pulled in every direction and have conflicting priorities on a daily basis and generally will take the path of least resistance, particularly where annoying children are concerned. Me, I happen to like shopping for food and cooking; it relaxes me. My darling wife on the other hand comes home from a busy day on the news desk, crashes out on the couch to let some rubbish TV wash over her and orders a pizza.

So this is my broad brush introduction to my take on food: what it is, what it does and how best to go about eating it. I am not an expert and I recommend this only as a starting point, from which you can find out more and begin to travel your own path to make sense of what, when and how to eat. We are all different, and I firmly believe that just because food exists, we don't have to eat all of it. In fact, some food will poison some people, where others will thrive on it. So take some time over the coming years to find out which foods work best for your body and which foods don't. Then eat the ones that work for you and avoid the ones that don't. Whatever you do, please take great care when eating or not eating according to some fad, trend or latest scientific thinking. If you choose to avoid wheat or dairy for example, you need to be certain beyond doubt that these foods are harmful to your body. There are some links at the end of this which you should read if you think you may have food allergies or food intolerances, because there is an awful lot of bad information out there. Also note that the science will change as the years go on, so stay informed.

The food we eat is important because not only does it give us our energy, it builds muscle, bones, hair, skin, all our organs and cells and affects our moods. So it makes sense to put the best things into the body that we possibly can.

All the food we eat can be measured by the amount of energy it contains, which is called calories.

There is only one equation you need to know:

If the calories you put in per day is larger than the calories you use up in the day, then the body will store calories, as fat.

By the same token, if the calories you put in per day is less than the calories you use up in the day, then the body will get rid of stored calories.

And if the calories you put in per day is equal to the calories you use up in the day, then you are in balance.

All food, i.e. calories, is basically either protein, carbohydrate or fat. We also eat vitamins and minerals but these will all be adequately covered by eating the right protein, carbohydrate and fat.

As we go about our day to day lives: going to work, doing the shopping, watching TV, eating, the energy we use up is supplied by our fat stores. All of us, even the slim ones, have plenty of fat stores to keep us going in our day to day lives. More than enough. So for the average Jo, we probably don't need to put in too many calories per day.

As swimmers, or as we exercise at a higher level than your average brisk walk, we start to use carbohydrate as our energy source. As swimmers, we therefore need to make sure we replace the used up energy as quickly as possible, by eating or drinking some carbohydrate.

The question is how much protein, how much carbohydrate and how much fat should we eat in a day? Or to put it another way, what percentage of our daily intake should be protein, what percentage carbohydrate and what percentage fat?

For all of us, a general rule of thumb is to eat about 60 percent carbohydrate, 20 percent protein and 20 percent fat, give or take 5 or 10 percent here and there. You have probably all seen the food pyramid, and if you more or less follow that, you will be eating your calories in about these proportions.

Before we go any further, let's look at what proteins, carbohydrates and fats do for us and what foods contain which.

Protein: builds and repairs muscle, hair, nails, cells

Found in: Meat, fish, milk, eggs, lentils, beans, peas, cheese..

Protein is digested more slowly than carbohydrates so you feel fuller for longer.

Carbohydrate: provides fuel for higher level exercise, (not the explosive exercise like throwing and jumping) and all of it is broken down into sugars which are used by exercising muscles, or are stored in the muscles and in the liver as glycogen for when we need it next.

Found in: Bread, cereal, rice, pasta, potatoes, fruit, vegetables, anything made with flour

To keep things easy, carbohydrates are either simple, e.g. sugar, or complex, e.g. pasta.

At the end of the day it's all just sugar, but the complex carbohydrates also come with

plenty of vitamins and minerals and fibre, which means the energy will be released to the body over a longer period of time, which is good for many reasons.

A good tip is to mix a packet of white rice with a packet of brown rice so you are not always eating white rice.

(For more detail than you really need on carbohydrate, see the note at the end.)

Fat: provides the lubrication around the body and carries the vitamins and minerals to all the cells in the body. The vitamins and minerals make the chemical reactions happen and will be found in ample quantities in a well balanced diet. You only need to take vitamin supplements if you have no faith in your diet. Most are water soluble, so if you take them you will pee most of it out.

But like football teams and politicians, there are good fats and bad fats.

Fat is either saturated, which is bad, or unsaturated, which is good. Saturated fat is found in butter, hard cheese, ice cream, full fat milk, margarine, deep fried food, red meat, chocolate, coconut and usually anything that is pre-prepared, among other things.

Unsaturated fat is found in oils, nuts, avocado, corn, soybean and fish...

Fats are a bit of a problem because although we need them, they are very high in calories, so we need to take care about how much of them we eat, and ensure we minimise the amount of saturated fat we eat.

You can usually tell the difference between the two because saturated fat is solid at room temperature, e.g. butter, but unsaturated fat is liquid at room temperature, e.g. olive oil.

Going back to the percentages of each we should eat, it is important to understand the labels on food. Unfortunately, labels are very misleading and are not getting much better. If the government or the food industry were really concerned about giving the public good information about food, all labels would say: This product contains X % protein, Y % carbohydrate and Z % fat. Everyone would understand.

But they don't and they don't do it because lots of food in the shops contains far more fat than the food industry wants you to know, most of which is saturated fat. Why? Because more and more food is convenience food for busy people. Convenience food is largely processed, nutritionally deficient and high in fat and other bad stuff we don't need because it has to be cheap to make and it also has to sit on a shelf for a year or two and not send us to hospital when we eventually get around to eating it.

Labels are complex so take a few moments, or a few hours if maths isn't your best subject, to understand what is going on.

If a product says it contains 60g of carbohydrate per 100g of product, 10g of protein per 100g of product and 30g of fat per 100g of product, THIS DOES NOT MEAN IT IS 30% FAT, OR 60% CARBOHYDRATE OR 10% PROTEIN.

It means absolutely nothing of the sort. It is like me saying to you, would you like seven 10p coins or one £1 coin? Everyone will take the £1 coin and my argument that you get seven coins instead of just one will fall on deaf ears. In fact you will think I am a bit dim. This is exactly what the food industry is saying to you. They are persuading you to take the seven coins because they are relying on you not knowing the value of coins.

1g of protein and 1g of carbohydrate contain 4 calories, (it will actually say kcalories on the label but ignore that), while 1g of fat contains 9 calories. So to find the actual percentages, look in the per 100g column and then you need to multiply the number of g of protein and carbohydrate by 4. Then you look at the total number of calories that it says there is per 100g and work out what percentage of that total is made up by the figures you just worked out for protein and carbohydrate.

To work out the percentage of fat, take the number of g of fat, multiply that by 9, then figure out what percentage that is. It is ridiculously complicated.

Here is an example for a crunchy granola snack bar:

Per 100g 6451 kcalories

Protein 8.3g

Carbohydrate 70.4g

Fat 16.1g

Now here are the calculations:

Protein 8.3g x 4 = 33.2 which is 7.3%

Carbohydrate 70.4g x 4 = 281.6 which is 62.4%

Fat 16.1g x 9 = 144.9 which is 32.1%

Total 459.7 kcalories

Start doing this for some of the packets and jars that you are eating, or about to put in your shopping basket. For a quick check, just look at the fat content.

Also note that you want to minimise the amount of sugar in the carbohydrate, and minimise the amount of saturated fat in the fat.

Pay particular attention to your cereals too. Cereals are generally good to eat morning noon and night, but only if they are the plain boring ones. Avoid cereals that are loaded up with sugar and contain all kinds of additives and preservatives. Anything that glows in the dark should not be eaten, so fruit loops for example really ought to be banned.

The new labels, the GDAs (guideline daily amounts) certainly help things a bit, especially with the saturated fat, but are still not anywhere near enough. Guideline amounts for who? For Swimmers? What age?

Points to note:

Light doesn't have to mean anything, it can mean the colour rather than the amount of calories.

Guideline daily amounts can be misleading if they are on children's food but show GDAs for adults.

Not all foods that say things like "all grain goodness" mean that they are all grain or all good. They may contain some grain and an awful lot of other things not so good.

Low Fat products only have to contain something like 10 percent less fat than their full fat relatives to be allowed to say Low Fat on the packaging.

A product contains 30 percent less fat than what?

50 percent more fruit! May also have lots more sugar and fat and who knows what.

Virtually fat free! Still may contain large amounts of calories and artificial sweeteners.

GDAs can be for very small servings, so be careful.

I do not buy into the separation of protein and carbohydrate. I look at milk, lentils and beans, which I consider to be nature's energy foods, and think that is a good way of eating. But I can believe there will be a small number of people for whom separating the two will really work and for those people I say do it.

So what is the simplest way to figure out what to eat? I tend to look at food in a traffic light system as either green food, amber food or red food.

Green food ó Everyone can eat these foods in unlimited quantities.

Amber food ó Everyone can eat these too, but begin to think about what you are eating and what effect it will have on you.

Red food ó Swimmers can eat these foods, but only eat them from time to time and be sure to know you are making a conscious decision to eat something that isn't that great.

Green food is food which is generally low in fat. This means fruit, vegetables, rice, pasta, lentils, beans, peas, chickpeas, salads, fish, lean meat, low fat yoghurt, skimmed or semi skimmed milk, whole grain or wholemeal bread, low sugar cereals, etc.

The important point to remember here is that while pasta is low in fat, what you put on it may not be. In most cases, you will either have a red sauce or a white sauce. Red sauce is tomato based, so will usually be low in fat. A white sauce is often made with butter, high fat milk, cream and often cheese. So more often than not, choose, or make, predominantly red sauces.

The same goes for salads. Only use very small amounts of dressing, and use olive oil and vinegar dressings.

Likewise baked potatoes. With all of these choices, if you add loads of butter and cream and cheese, you are turning a green amber or red!

Meats can also contain relatively high amounts of fat, some good and some bad. For example, the same size piece of steak and salmon both contain the same amount of protein. But the steak contains nearly twice as much fat. Worse still, the fat in the steak is saturated fat and the fat in the salmon is unsaturated fat.

The same sized serving of lentils has half the amount of protein but practically no fat, so it contains far fewer calories per serving, which means you can eat tons of it.

Chicken skin is where all the fat is so cut it off. Lamb and duck are higher in fat than pork (especially with the fat cut off) and all are higher in fat than fish.

This does not mean don't eat steak or lamb. It just means on the days you do eat them, you probably want to avoid other foods that are also high in fat.

Amber foods are everyday foods but which are higher in fat or less nutritionally beneficial than a similar green food. This means we will be eating more calories per unit of food, but not necessarily feeling fuller because of it.

Amber foods include, cheese, eggs, white bread, white sauces, higher fat meats, higher fat snack foods, pizzas, burgers, refined foods, processed foods, convenience foods, higher sugar cereals, some biscuits and cakes, etc.

Red foods are high fat foods. Eat them, but eat them occasionally.

Red foods are chips, chocolate, ice cream, crisps, fizzy drinks, deep fried food, butter, margarine, some biscuits and cakes, diet food, microwave meals (by and large), take away foods, foods from a machine, etc.

It is ok to eat red foods, but if you have had a packet of crisps as a snack, steak for dinner and ice cream for dessert, you need to be making different choices about what you eat and when you eat it if you want to perform well.

The ultimate power snack:

Banana, peanut butter and honey in a thick sandwich or roll.

Also worth noting is the important difference between low fat products and diet products because they are not at all the same. Low fat means they have taken out some of the fat. Think whole milk, semi skimmed and skimmed milk. The only difference between them is that they have taken out the creamy fat.

But diet products are products manufactured in the laboratory that are very low in calories. Food that has very low calories like this usually has all sorts of other things in it to make it last a long time and taste nice. In almost all cases this means the use of artificial sweeteners like aspartame. In my view aspartame is a dangerous toxin and should be avoided.

Hydrating

As well as eating well, we have to replace the fluid we lose from training. Everyone at least has to be drinking water. Better yet, you also want to be replacing the lost energy, so put some carbohydrate in there too. If you want to buy the tubs of carbohydrate drinks then do so. They get more relevant the older you get and the more you train. So for a ten

year old, I wouldn't bother. But for a 15 year old training ten times a week, then I would. Drink them before, during and after training and competition.

Alternatively, you can buy a packet of glucose powder in Boots and add a spoonful of that to your drinks bottle, with a small amount of juice or tiny amount of ribena or something to taste.

Or make up your drinks bottle with half fruit juice and half water. This is a pretty good approximation to your average energy drink and is absolutely fine.

Avoid squash as most of them will contain all sorts of artificial stuff the body doesn't need. For the average person a little squash is fine, but if you are drinking litres of it a day, you should probably think about changing.

To know if you are properly hydrated your pee should be clear or straw coloured and hardly smell at all. If your pee is a darker, more yellow colour and smells a bit, then go to the kitchen and drink a pint of water.

In summary:

What it all comes down to is this:

1. Eat unlimited quantities of fruit, vegetables, salad, rice, lentils, beans and peas.
2. Use oil to cook with.
3. Eat whole food.
4. Plan more.
5. Learn more.

Some other important points to remember:

Scales are for fish not for the bathroom. There is no point in having some random inanimate object ruining your day for no reason. You will know whether you are eating well by how much energy you have in the day and how your clothes are fitting. Throw the scales away.

The language we use is important. If you lose twenty quid, you get annoyed and want it back. So avoid saying phrases like 'I want to lose two kilos' as the subconscious mind will probably find ways of getting it back. Instead, say things like, 'I want to get rid of two kilos' or 'I want to set free two kilos' because the subconscious will have no interest in getting them back and they will stay away.

Eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full.

If you are struggling with your weight, only eat sitting at a table. The food we eat when standing up, walking around or sitting in a car is usually snack food with high calories and a high fat content.

The food industry relies for its profits on your being confused. Begin to take control by learning as much as you can about food.

A note about carbohydrate

To say that carbohydrate is either simple, which I have done, or more complex, which I am doing now, is not just a clever play on words, because the issue of carbohydrate is actually very complicated indeed. To understand carbohydrate you also need to understand the glycemic index and the glycemic load.

Some carbohydrate we eat is broken down into sugar very quickly, and has what is called a high glycemic index. These fast release carbohydrates send the blood sugar levels very high, very quickly and need a little care because in the longer term, they may lead to heart disease, diabetes and other complications.

But this is only part of the story, because some very fast release foods, i.e. foods with a high glycemic index, only contain very small amounts of carbohydrate and therefore do not have such a big impact on blood sugar levels as foods with a lower glycemic index but which contain a whole bunch of carbohydrates.

The whole effect, i.e. how fast and how much carbohydrate, is called the glycemic load, and this is the important one. Some food with a low, medium or high glycemic load are listed below.

Low ó fruit and vegetables, lentils, beans

Med ó rice, pasta, bread

High ó white bread, white rice, sugar, potato, chips, refined cereals

So, surprise, surprise, this is all just a complicated way of saying you want to be going for: whole wheat bread and pasta, brown rice, whole grains, fruits and vegetables, lentils and beans. Duh!

My recipes for good eating

1. Buy one large, good quality, non stick frying pan with a transparent lid.
2. Buy one very large, good quality casserole.
3. Buy one good quality general use kitchen knife.
4. Buy one medium sized steamer (it is a stainless steel thing like a fan that expands out and you put it in a saucepan with some boiling water. Very useful it is too.)

All the recipes are a bit vague on quantities, but you are not cooking for a dinner party here, you are feeding a hungry swimmer as quickly and painlessly as possible. So add, subtract, cook for longer or shorter, whatever you feel works.

The base

Pour a table spoon or so of olive oil into your large, good quality, non stick frying pan. I love onions, so I slice up three or four medium sized onions and let them cook on a medium to high heat until they are starting to go golden. This takes at least ten minutes, so be patient. I put the lid on as it cooks quicker and you can keep the heat lower. Chop up one (or two if you like) carrots quite finely and throw them in and let them go for a few minutes.

(if you want to add cumin, curry powder or paprika, now would be the time)

I like peppers, so I put in some green and/or red pepper here, chopped quite fine.

Chop up one leek quite fine and throw that in for another five or ten minutes.

I like garlic and it is good for you so I put six or seven cloves in at this point.

For a red sauce

Add half a tube or a tube of tomato puree

Add a tin of chopped tomatoes

This is your basic red sauce which you can put on rice, pasta, baked potatoes, mashed potatoes boiled potatoes and lentils.

To turn the base into more of a stew, you can throw in a tin of flageolet beans, lentils, or chick peas, to make it go further and to get some more protein and carbs.

For the meat:

After putting the leek and garlic in, then you can add some meat. Bacon is the obvious one. Trim the fat, cut into pieces, move the veg to the edges of the pan and cook up the bacon. When it's done, stir it all around and continue with the tomatoes.

Personally I like pork, so any pork, or chicken, or turkey or steak you like the look of (you don't need to get the most expensive cuts, you can trim bone and fat at home), cut it up into small ish pieces, move the veg to the sides and throw it in. Let it cook for eight to ten minutes or until you think it is done then add the tomatoes. Or, you can cook the meat at the beginning, take it out of the pan and keep it to one side and then add it back once you have added the tomatoes.

Or throw in a tin or two of tuna.

Chili

The trick is to vary the quantities and see what suits you best.

Get the biggest saucepan or casserole you can find. Heat some oil then add:

6 medium sized roughly chopped onions, then

4 chopped carrots, then

Some chopped green chili, depending on how strong you like it, (or none at all) then

A sliced red pepper and a sliced green pepper, or more if you like them
Lots of chopped garlic, a whole head usually, then
Add the ground beef, a kilo or so, but it's up to you, and cook it until it is brown
Add a desert spoon of marmite
Add a tube of tomato puree, then
More mushrooms than you think because they reduce when they cook
Two or three tins of red kidney beans
Two tins of baked beans
A tin of chopped tomatoes
Anything else you like
Cook it on a low heat for a few hours. Eat that day or better still, put it in the fridge and then heat it up and eat it then next day, or if you are me, for the rest of the week. Freeze the rest in large freezer bags, for a quick and easy meal.

Eat with rice, mashed potatoes, baked potatoes, pasta, and loads of peas.

A note on cooking rice.

Put one measure of rice and two measures of cold water into the saucepan. Add some salt. Cover. Heat until the water boils. Then turn the heat to as low as you can and leave it for twenty minutes. All the water will be gone and your rice will be ready.
In my view, just use your regular rice and forget about the non stick rice which tastes awful and costs twice the price. Rice should stick together in big chunks. Or if you like the non stick, then get basmati rice. It's a good idea to mix half white and half brown rice.

Simple risotto

Make the base (carrots are optional, I usually don't use carrots).
If you want meat, add it here, if you want fish, wait until later.
Add the rice (round risotto rice is best, but normal rice is fine) and one and a half times its volume in water.
Cover and cook until all the water has been absorbed, which should take around twenty minutes.
If you want fish, salmon for example, you place the salmon on top of the rice and base a few minutes before you think the rice is cooked. Cover and cook. Salmon only takes about eight to ten minutes like this. People usually overcook it.
Or if you want to cook the salmon separately, it cooks very well in the microwave. Cook it for half or one minute. Cut off the bits that are cooked, then cook the rest of it for another half or one minute. Most of a salmon fillet will be cooked by then. You want it almost raw in the middle. Trust me.

Vegetables

Vegetables are delicious. Eat them in huge quantities with everything. Here's how to cook them:

Peas are very easy and quick. Everyone should always have them in the freezer. Put them in a bowl with a small amount of water and microwave them for two minutes. Take them out and stir them around after a minute or so. Repeat if necessary. Job done. For a real treat, fry up some chopped onion and bacon in some oil. When they are nicely cooked, add the peas and serve that up to some hungry kids.

Onions ó slice them up and cook them in some oil over a medium to low heat either covered or uncovered. Cook them until they are light brown, which will probably take fifteen to twenty minutes.

Courgettes - steamed for five to eight minutes depending on how you like it and how tight your lid is, or cooked in a frying pan with a little oil over a medium to low heat

Leeks are my favourite. Cut up loads of leeks and put them in a frying pan with a little oil and butter, put the lid on and cook them for ten to twelve minutes over a medium to low heat. If you add plenty of fresh tarragon, they will be outstanding. If you have a leek or two spare, chop and fry them up for ten to fifteen minutes while the potatoes are boiling, then add them to the potatoes when you make mashed potatoes.

You can cook courgettes and leek together and either or both with onions. Get the onions at least half way done before adding the courgette or leek.

Broccoli ó steamed for five minutes

Open a tin of sweetcorn, or better yet, if it is in season, boil up some corn on the cob. Don't know how long. Eight to ten minutes probably.

Cauliflower ó in my view, best eaten in a white sauce, with or without a bit of cheese. So boil or steam the cauliflower for eight to ten mins and pour a white sauce over them. Go to Delia Smith for how to make a white sauce and getting it right is not always easy and you have to be patient with it.

Roast potatoes are my all time favourite and can be done quickly and easily. Cut the potatoes into fairly small pieces and boil for twelve minutes or so. Heat some oil in a roasting dish and then pour the potatoes in. Roast them up in a hot oven of around 200 degrees, or its equivalent, for about half an hour or so.

Or just heat the oil in the oven, cut up the potatoes and throw them in. Swizzle them around after half an hour, and they will be done in an hour in total.

Ratatouille

Chop up some onions and get them going in a couple of table spoons of olive oil
Chop up a red and green pepper and add them

Let them go for a while (five to eight minutes) on a medium to low heat, then chop up some garlic and add it, then chop an aubergine and add that too. Let that go for another

five minutes, then chop a courgette or two and add that. Let that go for another few minutes, then add half a tin of chopped tomatoes, cover and simmer on a low heat. Add the rest of the tin of chopped tomatoes if you feel you need to.

Ideal with everything. You can add lentils and beans to this to make it even better.

A simple salad

Buy the best greens you can and always include some lovely rich peppery rocket.

Add some cherry tomatoes and a small amount of chopped up avocado

Add a bit of mint or coriander if you have any.

Add some peas and/or mange tout if you are inclined, which I am.

Dressing: roughly five parts olive oil to one part balsamic vinegar

If you like, you can add a little mustard and crushed garlic.

Use the dressing sparingly; you only need very small amounts.

Stovies

Put some oil and butter in a large frying pan.

Chop up loads of onions as small or large as you like.

Chop up loads of potatoes, very small

then add some garlic.

(Bacon is also an option here once in a while)

Cover and cook on a very low heat for two to three hours, stirring occasionally. The onions and potato will go brown and sweet and it is delicious.

Eat with poached or boiled eggs.

Start them early in the morning and people will come from miles around to eat them.

Leek and potato soup

Melt a little butter in a pan.

Chop up four or five medium sized potatoes into small pieces.

Chop up four or five medium sized leeks into small pieces.

Put it all into the pan over a very low heat and let them sweat for ten or fifteen minutes.

Add enough water to nearly cover the leeks and potatoes.

Simmer for twenty minutes.

Mash or blend in a blender or with a hand blender.

Vary all the above quantities depending on how thick you like your soup and how much you like the leek and/or potato.