Nutrients - what you need to know

Understanding how different nutrients affect the body, how much of them you should consume and what food sources they come from are all important factors in having a healthy, balanced diet.

Sugar

Regularly consuming food and drink high in sugar increases your risk of obesity and tooth decay. Ideally, no more than 5% of the energy we consume should come from free sugars. Free sugars are any sugar added to food or drink products by the manufacturer, cook or consumer including those naturally found in honey, syrups and unsweetened fruit juice.

Many packaged foods and drinks can potentially contain high amounts of free sugar. Use the food label to help you choose foods lower in sugar. Swap sugary drinks for water, lower-fat milk or sugar-free drinks.

In 2015, the Scientific Advisory Committee of Nutrition (SACN) published a review of the evidence on the role of carbohydrates (including sugars) and health. The report concluded that free sugars should account for no more than 5% of daily dietary energy.

Saturated fat

Cutting down on saturated fat can lower your blood cholesterol and reduce your risk of heart disease. One of the easiest ways to reduce your saturated fat intake is to compare the labels on food products and choose the products with the lowest saturated fat content.

In Northern Ireland, the foods that contribute most to saturated fat intake are:

- butter
- chocolate confectionery
- cheese
- biscuits
- buns, cakes and pastries

Reducing the frequency in which you eat these foods, and the amount you eat, are two easy steps to cutting down on saturated fat intake.

In 2019, SACN published a review of the evidence on the role of saturated fat and health and concluded there was no need to change current advice.

Salt

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

The UK Government recommends that adults should have no more than 6g salt per day. Children should have even less. 6g of salt is about a teaspoonful.

Folic acid

It has been estimated that there are between 700 and 900 pregnancies affected by neural tube defects, for example, spina bifida, each year in the UK.

There is strong evidence that suggests consuming higher folic acid intakes before pregnancy and in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy will reduce the risk of neural tube defects. Pregnant women are advised to take folic acid supplements.

In July 2017, SACN published a review of the evidence on folic acid. The Committee continue to recommend mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid, along with controls on voluntary fortification.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D regulates the amount of calcium and phosphate in the body to keep bones, teeth and muscles healthy. In the summer months vitamin D is made in the skin when it is exposed to sunlight, however, in the winter months we don't get any vitamin D from sunlight.

The advice for people aged 4 years and above is to follow a healthy, balanced diet and consider taking a daily 10 microgram vitamin D supplement in the autumn and winter months as it is difficult to meet the 10 microgram recommendation from consuming foods naturally containing or fortified with vitamin D.

People whose skin has little or no exposure to the sun, or who always cover their skin when outside, risk vitamin D deficiency and need to take a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D throughout the year. Ethnic minority groups with dark skin, from African, Afro-Caribbean and South Asian backgrounds, may not get enough vitamin D from sunlight in the summer and therefore should consider taking a supplement all year round. Children aged 1 to 4 years should also have a daily 10 microgram vitamin D supplement. As a precaution, all babies under 1 year should have a daily 8.5 to 10 microgram vitamin D supplement to ensure they get enough. Children who have more than 500ml of infant formula a day do not need any additional vitamin D as formula is already fortified.

In 2016, SACN published a review of the evidence on vitamin D and updated their recommendations.