**Day 13**

**Title: Balance Your Food**

Now that you’re on your way toward eating a healthy, balanced diet, we’ve got good news for you. Not only are you eating good proportions of fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy, you’re also eating a good balance of macronutrients. *Yay! Wait, what? Macronutrients? That wasn’t on the list of things to watch.* You’re correct, intrepid balanced-diet seeker. Macronutrients aren’t a food group and we haven’t talked about how many servings to eat per day. That’s because a balanced diet builds in a balance of macronutrients, without any extra effort. *So what are macronutrients? And if I don’t have to think about them, why do they matter?* Good questions.

**What is a macronutrient?**

Put very simply, a macronutrient is simply a nutrient in food that is eaten in a large amount each day. This is compared to micronutrients, which are vitamins and minerals, and are eaten in tiny quantities each day. There are three macronutrients: carbohydrates, protein, and fat.

The reason why they matter? As part of your journey toward eating a balanced diet, you’ll learn about how your body uses the food it eats. This knowledge should help you on days when you’re tempted to eat nothing but doughnuts and hot cocoa. Hopefully, you’ll hear Lume saying something along the lines of “you’re gonna need some protein so you have longer lasting energy…” and you’ll reach for a bean burrito instead. So, here we go. The quick and dirty macronutrient extraordinaire.

**First up, carbohydrates**

Everyday, somewhere from 45-65% of your calories should come from carbohydrates. Quick side note here, very few foods are completely carbohydrates, or completely protein, or completely fat. Oils are an exception, since they are completely fat. But even butter, which is also a fat, has a slight trace of carbohydrates and a little bit of protein thrown in for good measure. Most foods contain a mixture of carbohydrates, protein, and fat. This is why recommendations for how much of each macronutrient you should get describes them as a proportion of your total calories for the day.

Ok, back to carbohydrates. Carbohydrates give you a lot of energy, vitamins, and minerals. Most people think of carbohydrates as grains. It’s true, cereals, oats, breads, rice, and pasta are all rich in carbohydrates. But fruits and vegetables also contain carbohydrates. Starchy vegetables, in particular, have a good amount of carbohydrates.

**Next up, protein**

It’s recommended that you get anywhere from 10-35% of your daily calories from protein. Protein is crucial for muscle growth and repair. It also provides energy. Foods high in protein also help keep you full, since they tend to be digested more slowly.

**Last but not least, fat**

Anywhere from 20-35% of your daily calories should come from fat. This includes fat already in foods, such as the healthy fats in an avocado, and the fat that you add to food, such as olive oil used to saute vegetables. Fat provides energy, helps your body absorb certain vitamins, and includes essential fatty acids that your body needs.

**A final word**

Carbohydrates, protein, and fat are all essential parts of your diet. If you eat a healthy balance of foods across the food groups, you should also get a proper balance of these macronutrients. Just keep in mind how you prepare your food matters. So even though a dinner of chicken-fried steak, fried vegetables, and a biscuit or two will count toward your servings of protein, vegetables, and grains, all that fried food will tip the macronutrient balance heavily toward fat. Or, conversely, a giant salad filled with garden-fresh vegetables, but no protein or fat, such as an oil & vinegar dressing, will get you your vegetable servings, but tip the macronutrient balance heavily toward carbohydrates. So with your next meal, keep your macronutrients in mind. They’re all important. But just like your food groups, keep them in balance.

**Source:**

Mann, J., & Stewart Truswell, A. (Eds.). (2012). Essentials of Human Nutrition (4th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.