**Day 4**

**Title: How to plan a balanced diet**

For many people, hearing the phrase “balanced diet” conjures abstract thoughts with no real plan of attack. Here, we break it down so it becomes easier to visualize and achieve.

**What is a balanced diet?**

A balanced diet is one that contains all of the main food groups in adequate, not excessive amounts. Following a balanced diet is essential for good health, disease prevention, and lifelong health. With a little planning you can enjoy a healthy and balanced diet whether you’re a meat eater, pescaterian, vegetarian, or vegan.

**Planning a balanced diet**

USDA’s MyPlate model is a good resource to use for planning a balanced diet. MyPlate <www.choosemyplate.gov> offers an easy-to-follow visual encouraging you to make half your plate fruits and vegetables with the other half a split of protein and grains. It also includes serving suggestions for dairy. Though MyPlate is a good guide, it doesn’t include a visual for healthy fats, which are an essential part of a balanced diet.

Here’s a guide for each group and how you should incorporate them into your daily life. Let’s dig...

**Start with plenty of fruits and vegetables**

You’ve heard this all of your life. But somehow the message hasn’t stuck because the majority of adults don’t meet the daily fruit and vegetable recommendation. The goal is to eat at least 2 ½ cups of vegetables and 2 cups of fruit per day. That’s it. Try starting the day with a fresh orange or a cup of berries and toss leftover vegetables into scrambled eggs for a jumpstart.

**Get great grains**

Whole grains are part of the foundation for a healthy and balanced diet. They are packed with fiber and flavor and some pack a significant protein punch. Limit refined grains like white bread and instead go for whole grains like wild or brown rice, oats, quinoa, bulgur, or whole wheat.

**Pick lean protein**

Fish, poultry, and lean beef or pork can be a healthy addition to any diet. Tofu, tempeh, and beans are ideal vegan protein sources. On the plate, protein should be about 3-4 ounces, or the size and thickness of a woman’s palm. Have a traditional plated meal or slice your protein into a stir-fry or rice bowl topped with plenty of vegetables. Beans do double duty - in the vegetable group and as a delicious source of plant-based protein. A versatile kitchen staple, use beans in tacos and salads or slow cook a big pot and enjoy with a spoon!

**Healthy fats**

There’s no need to fear fats – especially the good ones. Avocado, olives, seeds, nuts, and nut butters are delicious ways to get in heart-healthy fats. Top tacos with diced avocado or drizzle extra virgin olive oil onto grilled vegetables for a tasty heart-healthy dish. Swirl a tablespoon of almond butter into oats for protein and nutty flavor to start the day. Take a bag of nuts on the go for a heart-healthy snack.

**All About Dairy**

Dairy includes all milk, cheese, and yogurt. Dairy foods deliver protein, calcium and other nutrients in a tidy, nutrient rich package. However, these foods can be higher in saturated fat. If you decide not to eat dairy, be sure to include alternate sources of calcium in your diet daily. Sesame seeds, almonds, tofu, non-dairy milk alternative beverages, beans, and some leafy greens can do the trick.

**Put it all together**

Now that you’re armed with all of this information, you might be wondering how to put it all together. Incorporate some of the meal and snack ideas here and check yourself. When you go shopping, check yourself. Is at least half the cart filled with fruits and vegetables? At home, do a plate check. Does your plate mirror the MyPlate image or better? Give yourself a pat on the back!

**A final word**

And remember that more is not necessarily better. It’s really about balance. Having a plate of green beans for dinner daily would not only be boring but it would also miss the mark. You’d lack the protein necessary to maintain healthy muscles and organs. Skipping grains in exchange for another quarter of meat may put you in a fiber deficit and leave you feeling lethargic because you’re missing the energy from the carbohydrates. It all comes down to harmony. Push too much in one direction and things don’t come out right on the other end. Keep it balanced and you win!