

# The new food **MANTRA**



Eat a nutrient-rich diet to keep you in good shape for life. **Matt O'Neill** tells you how.

**D**uring the last decade, food marketers have busied themselves removing many nutritional nasties from our food. These 'better-for-you' foods are labelled 'less fat', 'salt-reduced', 'low-sugar' and 'additive-free', and are promoted as being healthier so you can get into shape.

But simply eliminating certain nutrients and food chemicals from your diet won't guarantee optimal wellbeing. What is important is the ingredients that improve the health of your cells and optimise your metabolism. These are the vitamins, minerals and beneficial plant compounds (known as phytochemicals) that you want to pack into your pantry.

## What is 'Nutrient-rich' eating?

Professor Adam Drewnowski from the University of Washington is leading the way to define the terms 'nutrient-rich' and 'nutrient density'. He suggests that a nutrients-to-calorie ratio can translate to a 'nutrient density score' that will help people make better food choices.

This means that the pathway to optimum health will be easier because we will consume more nutrients per calorie. Fast foods and sweet snacks offer many calories but few nutrients.

## Nutrition all-stars

Shining the nutrient-rich torch across a range of foods reveals that some foods shine brighter than others:

**Nuts** – Nuts contain healthy fats plus vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals, all helping to reduce heart disease risk, lower cholesterol and control weight. An average serve (30g) of mixed nuts provides about 20 per cent of the recommended daily requirement of vitamin E, a powerful antioxidant.

**Eggs** – Once eliminated from diets due to cholesterol concerns, eggs are now recognised as nutritional powerhouses. Along with other nutrients, they can contribute up to a third of the daily requirement for iodine, essential for healthy thyroid function and maintenance of metabolic rate. Unless you are sensitive to the cholesterol in eggs, an egg a day is acceptable.

**Milk** – Often cast out of weight loss diets; dairy products are now acknowledged as assisting weight management. In population studies, those who consumed less calcium tended to weigh more than those consuming more calcium.

**Fish oil** – Recent studies show that the long-chain fatty acids in fish oil may enhance cellular membrane function to help release more stored body fat, particularly when combined with exercise.

**Dark chocolate** – Emerging studies suggest that eating small amounts of dark chocolate daily, say 25g or two small squares can help improve blood pressure and cholesterol level. The antioxidants in the cocoa, which are more concentrated in the 70 per cent and 85 per cent dark chocolate, are believed to offer the benefits. Just remember that in this case more is not better!

## Processed food CAN be nutrient-rich

Just because a food might be nutrient-rich does not mean those nutrients are available to our body. Together with the concept of nutrient density comes the 'bioavailability' of the nutrients. For example, the calcium in dairy products is absorbed better than the calcium in spinach

which is bound up in the food.

Although processed foods tend to be less nutritious than their fresh counterparts, there are a few exceptions. For example, folate in the form of folic acid in breakfast cereals is more bioavailable than the folate found naturally in folate-rich vegetables.

Similarly, you will get more of the antioxidant lycopene from a can of tomato paste than from raw tomatoes. Heat the paste in oil to release even more lycopene.

## Your new nutritional mantra

Nutrient-rich eating is more than a healthy recommendation; it is a guiding philosophy that can communicate your true food values. If every time you plan a meal or snack you demand a nutrient-rich experience, then you will automatically choose wholesome foods. This will keep you in good shape for life - exactly what your body deserves.

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## Nutrient-rich SNACK suggestions

**Berry smoothie** – antioxidants and calcium

• **Mixed nuts and seeds** – monounsaturated fats and vitamin E

• **Canned salmon** – omega-3 fish oils

• **Natural yoghurt** – beneficial bacteria and calcium