

Good nutrition for good immunity

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The global pandemic has highlighted many fault-lines across society, and in our current state of ongoing disruption, it also presents us with unique opportunities to make changes. In our daily lives, some of the best changes we can make are around our food choices. Overweight and obesity have been linked to more severe Covid-19 outcomes, along with diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension and Type 2 diabetes. If there was ever the time to focus on a healthy diet to maintain a healthy weight and support our immunity, this is surely it! [This National Nutrition and Obesity Week \(NNOW\)](#), a range of South African health organisations have come together to collaborate with the Department of Health to highlight how essential good nutrition is when it comes to immunity.



The theme for NNOW 2020 (running from 9-19 October), **‘Good Nutrition for Good Immunity’** also takes into account how the pandemic has been disrupting food systems, leading to poorer food choices and is compromising food security for many South African families. In addition to good hygiene practices, one of the best defences against the ongoing threat of Covid-19 is a mostly plant-based diet that consists mainly of unprocessed and minimally processed foods. Diets that are based on preparing meals at home from whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds can help to support our immune systems and overall health, as well as reduce our intake of unhealthy fats, food additives and added sugar and salt.

The National Department of Health points out that unhealthy diets and lifestyles are amongst the top challenges we face in the 21st Century creating a significant burden on our country. We should use the Covid-19 pandemic as the inspiration for healthy eating and healthier lives. Through better food choices, more whole-food preparation at home, careful food shopping, and meal planning and community and home food gardening, it is possible to improve access to healthier food in affordable ways. Our focus needs to shift away from fast foods and sugary drinks that are nutrient-deficient to the home cooking of healthy nutrient-dense foods and clean water as our drink of choice.

CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA), Professor Pamela Naidoo agrees, “As a country, we have one of the highest rates of overweight and obesity in the world, a major contributor to cardiovascular disease, which is now known as a serious co-morbidity when it comes to Covid-19. Making poor food choices every day and maintaining an unhealthy weight greatly increases the risks of disease and death. On the other hand, focusing on consuming fresh vegetables, whole-grains, beans, and lentils daily, as well as regular physical activity, are straightforward ways to achieve healthy weight and protect ourselves and our families.”

NNOW collaborator, UNICEF South Africa is focusing on empowering South African adolescents and youth to reduce their risks of the NCDs that have been conclusively linked to more severe Covid-19 illness and death. “Healthy eating and physical activity habits are formed in childhood,” says UNICEF Nutrition Specialist, Gilbert Tshitadzi. “Young South Africans need to properly understand how their food choices are directly linked to their health. A healthy lifestyle needs to be aspirational in youth culture so that teens are empowered to develop optimally through their own self-care and conscious daily choices.”

Another organisation with a focus on children is Grow Great, a campaign working towards the goal of zero stunting by 2030. During the pandemic, Grow Great has intensified its focus on supporting breastfeeding mothers to ensure optimal nutrition for babies. “According to WHO guidelines, infants should be breastfed exclusively for the first six months of life, and breastfeeding can be continued after the introduction of complementary foods for at least two years or more,” says Duduzile Mkhize of Grow Great. “There’s no better food for babies than breastmilk. Covid-19 has plunged families into food insecurity and hunger, and that may well get worse over the coming months. Breastmilk is all a baby needs at the start of life, and it’s free. For food insecure households with infants, a focus on breastfeeding can make more budget available for nutritious food for other family members, while baby gets the best possible quality food for them.”

As we brace ourselves for an extended period of uncertainty as the pandemic continues to unfold, and for the economic recession that is likely to deepen, many South Africans are re-evaluating aspects of life and the ‘new normal’ we’d like to experience in a post-Covid world. During hard lockdown, home cooking was a necessity for everyone. For many, social distancing requirements are still curbing the enthusiasm for eating out. Concerns for our health and for the immunity of vulnerable family members are still top of mind for many families. It is in many ways an ideal time to shift to healthier eating by including more whole foods in our diets.



President of ADSA (Association for Dietetics in South Africa), Dr Christine Taljaard-Krugell points out that introducing healthier family eating habits can be enjoyable. “What some people don’t realise is that a family diet based on home-cooked whole foods is full of variety rather than restrictive. Healthy options also do not have to be more expensive. In fact, you can create substantial savings through meal planning, shopping tips and smart food preparation. It’s fun and easy to involve your children in preparing and sharing meals at home, which helps them develop lifelong healthy eating habits. If you don’t have the knowledge and skills, it can be helpful to connect with a dietitian as they are specifically trained to translate nutrition expertise into practical plans and healthy eating strategies to suit your lifestyle.”

Carol Browne of the Nutrition Society of South Africa (NSSA) urges South African families to prioritise their nutrition well-being in the time Covid-19. She says: “Under- and over-nutrition are both forms of malnutrition that compromise immune function and make people more vulnerable to infection, illness and death. Unfortunately, the availability, affordability, and preference for highly processed foods in South Africa results in the prevalence of malnutrition and diet related NCDs. Choosing a diet based on home-cooked whole foods is a solid foundation for good nutrition and good immunity.”

Some strategies for healthy eating in the time of Covid-19 include:

- For one full day every week prepare only unprocessed or minimally processed plant-based food: vegetables and fruit, starchy food, and legumes
- Include a variety of vegetables and fruit in daily meal plans – not only on weekends. Frozen, dried, and indigenous vegetables and fruit should be included where possible. Include both cooked and raw vegetables and salads in meals
- Portion sizes of vegetables can be more generous if a variety of fruits is not available. Add extra vegetables to recipes such as stews, curries, stir-fries, salads, soups, sandwiches, brown rice, whole-wheat pasta dishes or to egg dishes such as scrambled eggs and omelettes. Baby spinach, tomatoes, carrots, beetroot, and sundried tomatoes are some of the vegetables that are easy to add to dishes
- Using fresh vegetables to cook large batches of soups, stews or other dishes will make them last longer and provide meal options for a few days. These can also be frozen where possible and then quickly reheated
- 'Vegify' your favourite recipes by swapping some of the animal-based foods with whole plant-based alternatives. Meat can be replaced with vegetables like mushrooms, eggplant and baby marrows or with legumes like lentils, beans, and chickpeas
- Dry beans, peas, lentils, and soya can also be used in many dishes, such as salads, soups, and stews
- Get children into the habit of eating raw vegetable sticks or fruit when they are hungry between meals. They are more likely to enjoy eating vegetables when they have eaten a variety from an early age (from six months) and when they see their parents enjoying vegetables
- Boost your access to fresh vegetables, herbs, and fruit by growing your own

National Nutrition Week and National Obesity Week 2020 collaborators

1. National and provincial Departments of Health
2. Department of Basic Education
3. South African Military Health Services (SAMHS)
4. Department of Social Development
5. Grow Great Campaign
6. Liezel Engelbrecht (Personal capacity)
7. Lenore Spies (Personal capacity)
8. United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF)
9. Clinton Health Access Initiative
10. The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA)
11. The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)
12. The Nutrition Society of South Africa (NSSA)
13. The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA (HSFSA)
14. Stellenbosch University, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Department of Global Health, Division of Human Nutrition
15. World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

For additional information on how to make eating whole foods a way of life, including tips, shopping advice, meal planning hacks and delicious recipes, visit www.nutritionweek.co.za.

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