

NUTRITION AND HEALTH

Too many people are ill for too much of their lives, and too many people die prematurely from preventable diseases. This was the message highlighted by Sarah Paynton at the start of her most informative and entertaining presentation on Nutrition and Health to the Friends of Webb-Peploe Surgery. Sarah is a Primary Care Dietitian in Southampton, and she was the guest speaker at a health education meeting run by the Friends of Webb-Peploe Surgery on Tuesday 9th June at the Lymington Baptist Church.

The central thrust of Sarah's presentation was that, if we wish to reduce the risk of illness and premature death, we must strive to maintain a healthy weight, and that the best way to do this is through healthy eating and exercise. Those who eat an unbalanced and unhealthy diet and who lead a sedentary life are likely to become overweight or obese. There is now irrefutable evidence to link obesity with reduced life expectancy through diseases such as stroke, coronary heart disease, diabetes and bowel cancer.

Sarah stated that, in 2006, twenty-four percent of the adult population of the UK were obese – a fifteen percent increase since 1993 – whilst in the same year, sixteen percent of children were obese, and that the indications are that these figures are on the increase. She went on to say that a combination of waist measurement and Body Mass Index (BMI) provides a good indication of whether or not a person has a normal, healthy weight. The normal waist measurement for men is between sixty-nine and ninety-four centimetres, whilst for women it is sixty-one to eighty centimetres, and the normal range for BMI is twenty to twenty-five. BMI gives an indication of body fat based upon height and weight, and a simple BMI calculator can be obtained from any surgery.

Our priority, Sarah said, must be to reduce our intake of fat and saturated fat and increase our intake of fruit, vegetables and starchy carbohydrates, and the majority of her presentation focused on what constitutes a healthy diet.

Starting with fruits and vegetables, Sarah explained that we should have as wide a variety as possible, and that we should aim for five portions a day. A portion is usually eighty grams. It does not matter if each fruit or vegetable is fresh, frozen, dried or tinned, but Sarah emphasised that fruit or vegetable juice counts as only one portion – no matter how many glasses are drunk!

Moving on to starchy carbohydrates – bread, rice, pasta, and potatoes – Sarah pointed out that these are generally low in fat and sugar and should be included at every meal. Their role is to provide essential vitamins, minerals and fibre as well as energy that is released slowly. She emphasised that accompaniments to these foods may contain sugar and fat, and so they should be kept to a bare minimum, and that we should aim for whole grains wherever possible.

Turning to milk and dairy products, Sarah explained that these are essential for our bone health. They contain calcium, protein and vitamins A, B12 and

D, and we should aim to have two to three portions a day – examples of which include: one pot of yoghurt, one ounce of hard cheese or one third of a pint of milk. These products can have a high saturated fat content, and so Sarah said that, wherever possible, we should choose low fat versions.

Sarah's other major food category comprised meat, fish, egg and beans. These contain protein, iron, vitamin B and minerals, and they help our bodies to grow and heal and to attain immunity from illness. A balanced diet should contain two to three portions (about four ounces each) a day, and we should be careful to avoid products that are high in saturated fat. We should also aim to have a portion of fish twice a week, one of which should be from the oily fish category. Oily fish contains Omega Three fatty acids, which are good for heart, brain and joints, and fish in this category include: salmon, mackerel, trout, sardines, herring, pilchards, kippers, whitebait, fresh (not tinned) tuna, anchovies and swordfish.

Finally, Sarah turned to our need for salt and alcohol. She pointed out that, on average, we eat between nine to eleven grams of salt each day – when all we need is less than half of that! Too much salt can cause high blood pressure, which increases the risk of stroke and heart disease. We should strive to limit salt intake by avoiding processed foods, adding less salt both when we prepare and eat our food, choose products that are labelled as having no added salt, and use alternatives, such as: herbs, spices, vinegar and lemon juice for flavour. The dangers of alcohol abuse are well documented, and Sarah explained the recommended maximum daily limit – three to four units for men, and two to three units for women – and she reminded us that a unit is half a pint of standard strength beer or lager, a twenty-five millilitre measure of spirit, or a one hundred and twenty-five millilitre glass of wine.

Sarah acknowledged that, as the food we eat is a very important part of our culture and social lives, we must find a middle ground to enjoy our diets whilst still protecting our health. To sum up, Sarah reminded us that nutrition is our bodies' fuel and that everyone needs a healthy balanced diet made up from a variety of different foods – in other words: 'We are what we eat!!'