

10 Practical Rules for Dietary Fitness

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I have worked in the health and fitness industry for almost two decades; time enough to gain some perspective on what systems, methods and products are most effective in fueling an athlete's body effectively, and what works when it comes to maintaining a healthy fighting weight.

In retrospect, I can name dozen of supplements and diets that were found to have little or no value. In some cases they were dangerous, in others almost comical, but all sought to relieve weight in pocketbook.

There is and probably never will be a shortage of consumer "hooks." New supplements and diets continue to emerge and desperate people will continue to buy into them. Remember chromium picolinate? At it's height of popularity over \$6 million of this miracle supplement were being sold per week. When the clinical studies caught up with the hype, it was found to have no real value for weight loss.

"Super" juices, algae, oxygenated waters, pills, powders, and tinctures of various kinds pop up constantly with little or no quality control, science, or regulation behind them. Diets based on body shape, blood type, ethnicity, high fat, low fat, high/low carb, cavemen and Frenchmen fill the shelves of the weight-loss section of your local book store.

How are you supposed to sort through the ballyhoo and determine what really works and has value? I believe if you stick to just a few basic rules you can go a long way towards promoting your health, performance, healthy weight, and may save yourself a bunch of money along the way.

10 Dietary Fitness Rules

1. The less processed a food is the healthier it is for you. When a food is processed, nutrient value is taken out of it; to the point where it has to be "enriched" in order to add nutrients back in. The closer a food is to its pre-harvest state (the vine) the more nutrient density it will have.

Your locally-grown vegetable stand is preferable to produce that comes halfway around the world to your super market, and whole grains are better for you than highly processed and enriched flours.

2. Good nutrition is all about forming habits. Do you remember what you ate the last time you were starving? Well, you will likely gravitate towards that food again next time you are hungry. Eat healthy foods and you will want healthy foods.

The trick is incorporating them in the first place. Focus on forming long-term habits, not short-term dietary changes, and be open minded to new and different food choices.

3. Plan and execute a dietary strategy. People often fall into dietary pitfalls when they don't know what their next meal is going to be comprised of or where it is coming from. If you plan out your meals you maintain control over momentary cravings.

Even if you are not preparing your own food you should have several healthy options for eating on the fly. Get to know the caloric content and nutrient value of the foods you are putting in your body. Even fast food has healthier options if you choose them.

4. Avoid supplementation when possible. For the athlete, supplements are a convenience during training. But is that expensive energy bar any better than a banana? Is that tub of powder as effective for post-workout recovery as a glass of chocolate milk?

Not really.

The quality, purity, and benefit of many supplements are suspect at best. We often worry about our food standards but give little regard to the supplements we consume.

5. Consume a colorful variety of foods. Tomatoes, blueberries, dark chocolate, spinach, and apples form a rainbow of nutrient density; vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants. The more colorful your plate is the better it will be for you.

6. Don't believe the hype. Did you know that anyone can start producing a supplement out of their garage? This year there will be dozens of new energy drinks, diet pills, and performance aids thrust on the market—most with little or no real value to the consumer. Each will purport some new and revolutionary angle.

If you are looking for a nutritional edge, focus on quality macro-nutrient intake, variety, and consistency.

7. Eat often and don't go hungry. Want to burn more calories? Eat. Whenever you eat your body must burn calories to process the food. Consuming small meals throughout the day keeps your metabolism elevated.

What foods are most effective for boosting your metabolism? You guessed it: foods that are in their natural state and are not already processed by a machine.

8. Add it up then eyeball it. People are often surprised at the amount of calories a food, or a days worth of food, adds up to. We now have an enormous amount of resources for calculating caloric and nutrient intake, many of which are free.

A good place to start a dietary program is by evaluating your current food intake. Once you have a conception of portion size and control, it is much easier to eyeball what your plate should look like. Consulting with a registered dietician is money well spent, and you will gain solid, factual and executable guidance.

9. Don't fight your genes. Your body type was largely pre-determined before birth, just as your eye color and height. People often set physical expectations or goals for themselves that may not be achievable within their genetic blue print.

Individuals on the cover of magazines and infomercials often go to extreme, even illegal, lengths to achieve the "perfect" body. It is far more productive to focus on health and wellness versus targeting the aesthetics of a particular body part.

10. Settle in for the long haul. With so much focus on physical appearance in our media it is hard to be patient. But a slow, steady weight loss is far more preferable to a quick one. Habits take time to change and you will have setbacks. But your focus should be on a healthy and practical eating regime that will facilitate a lifetime of health and fitness. Diets produce temporary weight loss.

By focusing on a holistic approach to dietary fitness, you will fuel your body more effectively, achieve a healthy weight, and support your immune system. There are compelling new studies coming out all the time, but the media often exploits them before they have been confirmed through consistent scientific scrutiny.

A bit of skepticism is not necessarily a bad thing when it comes to considering any radical dietary changes. Don't treat your body as a test tube, leave that for the scientist.

Matt Russ has coached and trained athletes up to the professional level, domestically and internationally, for over 15 years. He currently holds the highest level of licensing by both USA Triathlon and USA Cycling, and is a licensed USA Track and Field Coach. Matt is Head Coach and owner of The Sport Factory, and coaches athletes of all levels full time. He is also a freelance author and his articles are regularly featured in a variety of magazines and websites. Visit www.thesportfactory.com for more information or email him at coachmatt@thesportfactory.com