

Grade “A” Food

As a current college student, I have experienced the peanut butter and jelly elementary years, the questionable meat middle school years, as well as the pizza party days of high school. As time was spent horse playing, flirting, or studying, I seldom thought about the food I consumed. I am a college student now and not much has changed. My typical day consists of a thermos full of Maxwell Instant coffee, a can of chicken soup, a bag of potato chips, and frozen TV dinners which are sometimes replaced with chocolate chip pancakes. In retrospect, I am aware of my diet’s lack of nutrition but in the moment of studying, nothing seems as important as learning to balance chemical equations for the upcoming exam. Exhausted from the day’s work, I’ll usually come home to my healthy-choice roommate feeding me useless nutritional information while I feed on a bag of buttered popcorn. “You know, you should really consider replacing that with some low-fat yogurt,” she’d preach as I’d munch, “It may sound crazy, but yogurt really helps me focus.” One thing is for sure, food and its mysterious wonders has never been an area of focus for me. Since recent studies throughout college campuses revealed positive effects of healthy diet on academic performance, my interest in food has manifested. But, is there really a relationship between diet quality and optimum performance? Certainly, this is worth giving some thought. That so called “optimum performance” could very well come in handy for my exam.

Some perform by going to the gym; others may enjoy painting, playing sports, reading books, talking to others, or even study for exams. Athlete or a studyholic; getting energy from some food source is a must. The energy found in food enables the brain to function which allows us to carry out our daily activities. In short, nutrients from the food enters our body and is broken down into smaller parts by our organs which are broken down even further so that our cells can feed off of them (Kahn). We give energy to our cells via food and the giving is then reciprocated when our cells function efficiently, enabling us to perform. Students such as me are especially hungry for this energy during finals week. This is because it is imperative that we spend as much time as we physically can on learning our subject material in order to get a good grade. The checklist of materials for that week is a simple list consisting of the three essentials; energy drinks, sugary snacks, and books. I find that the concept of getting energy from food is easy to grasp; just eat and voila! Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Foods range in the glycaemic index (GI) which ranks the structure of energy yielding carbohydrates, or sugars, in food (Canning). But if sugar is still sugar, why would it matter how they are structured? Since, foods range from simple sugars to complex carbohydrates they affect our blood glucose levels differently. Simple sugars such as white flour or most processed foods tend to give short bursts of energy whereas complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables release it more slowly (Canning). This could be due to the fact that it takes longer to break down the complex arrangements. With that being said, a Red Bull, Snicker bar, and a bag of Cheetos would give me just two hours before I'm face down, cheek in book. But if I wanted to buy more time, I should go with the apple, carrots, and cup of tea combination instead.

Buying this much needed time could be as easy as buying the right foods at the supermarket. Some foods to consider would have to be some lean meat, legumes, and eggs; all the typical sources of protein. Protein is another one of those miracle nutrients that influence drive when energy is in high demand. They are composed of amino acids which are known to be “the building blocks of life forms” (Ahmad). Without them, bodily functioning would not be possible. Another role that it plays in our bodies is that it is a catalyst for all types of intercellular reactions, making it essential for enabling us to maintain energy throughout the day (Ahmad). After hours of feeling knocked down by stacks of reading material, protein’s “building block” ability has me feeling ready to take on the work.

Within these piles of reading material, it is typically challenging to remember every single bit of subject matter. We are expected to know formulas for finding the area of a circle, measure of a triangle’s angle, and the amount of ounces in a ton by the next day. Specific dates of American civil war battles are expected for next week. How does one even begin to remember all of this? As we go through various learning processes, the neural connections in our brain tend to become stronger (Consumer’s Medical Journal). This, of course, requires more brain power. More brain power allows us to become more focused and give attention to detail; thus, memorizing formulas and dates should come at greater ease. So, what is the deal with my roommate’s claim that her low-fat yogurt helps her focus? According to nutritionist Catherine Saxelby, diet *can* make a difference when preparing for exams. She states that “smart nutrients” such as folate affects the synthesis of neurotransmitters which are important in making those neural connections for memory storage. Aside from yogurt, choosing to snack on a juicy fruit can also prove to be beneficial. For example, an orange (also rich in folate) helps

lower levels of an amino acid associated with memory loss (M.D). Research also shows that black beans contain a nutrient that aids in synthesizing the acetylcholine neurotransmitter, which is “crucial for memory,” (M.D.). Gain topnotch memory performance simply from eating the right foods. Think of the bundle one could save on flash cards alone!

Speaking of saving, every college student should know what to expect when entering their first year. Having a budget is just one of the many concerns I keep track of. Other do's and don'ts of campus living have a lot to do with expectations; the most important being don't cut class, for it is one of the more common reasons students get bad grades. Even with a valid statement of illness signed by a doctor, absences are unacceptable, leaving notes signed from mom out of the question. This doesn't seem at all fair since getting sick is beyond one's control. Or is it? According to a Children's Lifestyle and School-performance study, an assessment of academic performance revealed that a decrease in attendance is highest amongst undernourished children (Florence). This suggests that a refined sugar diet could be the cause of an absence. A diet influenced by bad judgment; no form of documentation could excuse that. The study also concluded that consuming a variety of nutrient dense foods and getting the recommended daily servings is important in order to prevent micronutrient deficiencies and other health problems that may interfere with performance. Of all the do's and don'ts, I'd say that a healthy diet is making its way to the top of the list.

Whereas some could jeopardize their grades by being nutrient deficient, others don't do well as a result from test taking skills. It is safe to say that I usually thought of myself as a terrible test taker. No matter how much I felt prepared for exams, the rush of nerves never

seemed to escape me. Eager to fix my problem, I found myself borrowing exam rituals other students do in order to relieve their anxiety. I've tried everything from taking deep breaths to stretch breaks, to even chewing fruity gum; none of which have been successful in stimulating my confidence. Eating the right foods, however, was not as discriminate. Evidence shows that, for anyone, certain nutrients can improve the brain cell function which promotes the flow of good mood neurotransmitters such as serotonin (Saxelby). Of these "smart nutrients", omega-3 fatty acids found in seafood and nuts improve circulation of the brain. Because of this more serotonin is dispersed, thus improving mood. My new exam ritual has been adapted to a pocket stash of walnuts and pecans.

Sometimes even eating the right foods doesn't seem enough. Sure, I'll eat an orange instead of a chocolate bar, a salad instead of fried chicken, or drink tea in place of a soda, but something always seems to be missing. Since healthy dieting involves restricting the amount of food eaten, that empty feeling could very well come from the lack of food in my stomach. Being constantly hungry, food is always on my mind even when I don't want it to be. This is upsetting because I strive to be clear minded when attending class and mentally preparing for a pop quiz. The Catch-22 of dieting had me questioning if this lifestyle was even worth it. As it turns out, it's not only what you eat but the way you eat that it important in controlling your hunger thoughts. Even though fats and sugars trigger cravings more readily than other nutrients do, eating appetizers and snacks such as peanut butter on celery before a meal could leave one with a feeling of fullness (Bowden). The feeling of satiety is important for the student side of me in that it means less thinking about food and more thinking about school.

The concept of input and output taught in my algebra class last week can be applied to the thought of diet and academic performance in college students. The variable you put into an equation directly affects the outcome. Similarly, the foods I put into my body affects the way my body performs. Eating foods containing essential nutrients as opposed to empty calories proves to be beneficial for optimal performance. Healthy dieting techniques have students like me preparing for positive futures as well as preparing healthy homemade dishes. By investing in healthy lifestyle choices, I will be one step closer to getting my diploma and starting a career...with a side of success.

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