RAW FOODS

Nutrients for Optimal Health

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Raw foods provide the nutrients essential for good health. Better yet, they're free of the chemical additives found in processed foods.

Pure Food

Hippocrates once wrote that pure food, pure water, and pure air were the keys to good health. While this advice will hardly seem news to most readers, most of us need to pay closer attention. The purity of our food supply can no longer be taken for granted. The preservatives, antibiotics, pesticides and genetically engineered molecules that permeate today's processed foods would make Hippocrates shudder.

Besides avoiding processed foods, anyone who is interested in improving their health and preventing disease should consider the benefits of adding raw foods to their diets. After all, our diets have more of an effect on our body's health than any other factor within our control. Raw foods provide all of the vitamins, minerals, essential oils, enzymes and amino acids that our cells need for their proper function. Foods that are processed, refined and chemically altered are stripped of these vital nutrients.

Dietary Changes

The simplest way to reap the benefits of raw foods is to incorporate them into your diet slowly. I chose the opposite approach. In April I read several letters to the editor praising an article called Clean on the Inside found in the April 24, 2006 issue of New York Magazine. A regular subscriber, I found this particular issue and made a list of the foods I needed, including green juice, organic green tea, brown rice, apples, flaxseed and almonds. I was particularly taken with the article's first sentence, which described Donna Karan losing 35 pounds by following this approach.

I decided to give raw foods a try on a long weekend off. Even though I seemed to be eating more, within one week on a raw food diet, I lost weight, slept better, and overall felt better. But by the second week I found myself gobbling M&M almonds on my way home from work. Out of control, I resumed my regular diet of candy bars and junk food. I decided I lacked discipline.

Months later, plagued by allergies, mood swings, joint pain and fatigue, I decided that the slow approach to incorporating raw foods might work better for me. I bought more apples and almonds along with blueberries, which I eat for breakfast mixed with plain yogurt. I also mix raw pumpkin seeds with almonds and have found them to be the perfect snack.
When I added ginger tea to my diet, my sugar cravings vanished. By adding raw foods slowly, I've learned to listen to my body's need for nutrients.

**Studying Labels**

I've also learned to study labels although I tend to opt for foods lacking labels, for instance bunches of organic carrots. I've learned to avoid excitotoxins, which are chemicals like aspartame and monosodium glutamate that injure immune system cells and promote inflammation. I've also learned to avoid foods and medications containing brilliant blue (FD&C blue 1), quinolone yellow and red food dyes, which are laden with iodized salts.

A slow learner, I also found that free-range and organic beef and poultry products are better choices for me. The traces of penicillin found in the packaged products often gave me hives or nasal congestion. And I've found that incorporating raw foods into my diet is a great way to beat the heat. For the perfect meal on a balmy evening nothing tops a dark green salad studded with grilled shrimp and cashew nuts.

**Strict VS Moderate Approach**

Strict followers of raw foods advocate not heating food at temperatures higher than 118 degrees. Higher temperatures are reported to destroy natural enzymes and degrade proteins while concentrating any traces of pesticides. Other nutritionists disagree, noting that the body produces adequate digestive enzymes. Working in a clinical laboratory, I've found that not everyone has adequate enzyme supplies.

**Facilitating Digestion**

Adding pineapple and papaya to one's diet boosts enzyme levels and improves digestion. For people (and canines) with autoimmune arthritic disorders, digestive enzymes are a well-known therapy. The idea here is that large protein molecules cannot always be adequately digested.

When they accumulate they promote inflammation. The wealth of nutrients in raw whole foods has also been well established and each year new compounds are found. To reap these benefits, add color to your diet. Foods of different colors are known to contain different nutrients. The next time you shop for groceries, try selecting an assortment of raw foods of different colors. Your body, and especially your immune system, will thank you.