

EDUCATION BULLETIN May 14, 2020

NOURISHING OUR BODIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Content Attribution

We have reviewed, synthesized, adapted, and added to information from the following sources. Please consult these sources if you want more information.

- [Associations Between Dietary Patterns and Sleep-Related Impairment in a Cohort of Community Physicians: A Cross-sectional Study](#)
- [Food for Thought: An Exploratory Study of How Physicians Experience Poor Workplace Nutrition](#)
- [On Nutrition for Performance in Medicine](#)
- [Physician Nutrition and Cognition During Work Hours: Effect of a Nutrition Based Intervention](#)
- [Running on Empty: A Review of Nutrition and Physicians' Well-Being](#)
- [What Should I Eat on My Night Shift?](#)

Bulletin development: Alicia Polachek MA, Co-Director, Well Doc Alberta
Jane Lemaire MD, Co-Director, Well Doc Alberta

Why is Nutrition Important for Physicians?

Good nutrition and hydration may improve cognition and performance. In a study of Calgary physicians, staying hydrated and eating well-balanced, small meals throughout the workday contributed to better cognitive performance, equivalent to that of someone more than 10 years younger. Conversely, dehydration is shown to decrease attention, short-term memory, visual perception, psychomotor skills, and alertness, while inadequate nutrition contributes to irritability, light headedness, tremors, nausea, poor concentration, and difficulty with decision-making. Research also suggests that foods high in saturated fat and sugar may impair sleep, while diets high in vegetables, berries, legumes, and nuts may reduce sleep-related impairment (defined as perceived tiredness and functional impairments associated with reduced alertness).

What Challenges Do Physicians Face in Eating Well?

Physicians often find it difficult to attain ideal nutritional habits, especially when working in busy clinical settings. The evidence reveals many barriers, ranging from simple logistics like poor access to healthy food choices at work, to workload factors such as limited time to eat due to incessant demands. Busy lives amidst the gender and generational shifts in medicine make meal planning a laudable but frequently unattained goal. An important additional barrier is the perception of professionalism. Physicians often feel that taking time to eat is unprofessional and that patients seeing them with food or drink in hand would view them as such, despite evidence to the contrary. In addition to these barriers, research shows that sleep deprivation can increase the likelihood of eating higher calorie comfort foods that are high in sugar and salt.

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These challenges are likely compounded during COVID-19. Workplace food services may have reduced hours or fewer menu options. Regulations about outside food may limit options. Appropriate eating spaces may be limited. PPE may make it more challenging to consume adequate food and fluids throughout the day. Working different shifts may alter food intake patterns. Increased stress may lead to a reduced appetite or, alternatively, cravings for comfort foods that tend to be less healthy. For physicians who may be at home more than usual, boredom may lead to increased food consumption, especially of less healthy options.

How Can We Nourish Our Bodies During the Pandemic?

- **First and foremost, don't stress about it.** While good nutrition is important, remember that we're in the midst of a pandemic. It's not necessarily the time to aim for perfection or overhaul our diets. Be compassionate with yourself and set reasonable expectations based on how much bandwidth you and your family have. Give yourself permission to not be perfect and to find occasional solace in food if that's what you need. Don't judge yourself.
- **Try to eat regularly and stay hydrated.** When possible, eat and drink regularly, taking nutrition breaks throughout your day. Eat a healthy breakfast to reduce fatigue and boost performance.
- **Plan ahead.** Having a plan may give you a sense of control during this uncertain time.
 - o Develop a meal plan. This helps ensure we have healthy food options on hand and may limit the urge to reach for unhealthy options when hungry and tired.
 - o Cook in bulk when possible to prevent the need for daily cooking. Freeze meals in premeasured portions to make it as easy as possible down the road.
 - o Identify options for accessing nutrition and hydration while at work. Consider how PPE requirements may impact this and find locations where you can store and eat your food.
- **Prepare foods you can easily take with you to work.** Prepare or purchase easily portable foods you can take with you in case workplace options are limited. Fresh veggies, fruit, boiled eggs, yogurt cups, protein shakes, cheese, nuts, etc., can all be good on the go. Having healthy options can help reduce the likelihood of reaching for convenience foods in the workplace. Try to avoid processed foods, opting instead for whole foods whenever possible.
- **Outsource food preparation if needed.** Consider using meal delivery services or get delivery from local restaurants. Consider hiring a friend or family member who might be willing to prepare meals for you and your family.
- **If you are working night shifts, consider the following:**
 - o Eat your main meal before beginning your shift. Incorporate foods that will keep you feeling full longer such as proteins and slow-release carbohydrates.
 - o When possible, limit meals between 0000-0600, as eating during that time may decrease alertness and contribute to weight gain or metabolic disorders. If you do need to eat during this time, opt for protein rich snacks, rather than carbohydrates.
 - o Eat a healthy breakfast after your shift, before daytime sleep, but be careful not to eat immediately before trying to sleep as it can contribute to insomnia.