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E-News Exclusive

Top Five Diet Questions: The Next Generation

By Gloria Tsang, RD

Spreading the goodness of nutrition is my passion. As the founder of an online nutrition community run by RDs, I receive many diet-related questions from visitors every day. Through the years, I have noticed a clear increase in nutrition knowledge among the general public. A decade ago, readers asked about the health benefits of omega-3s and garlic. Now, questions are more in-depth and tend to fall into five main topic areas.

1. Is flax oil better than fish oil?

This is by far the most popular question. With the increasing popularity of vegetarian eating and mounting fears about mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in seafood, our clients often think that the vegetarian version of omega-3 from flax oil is superior to fish oil for heart health. Although our bodies convert alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) into eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid, the conversion rate is slow. In addition, flax oil contains a high concentration of ALA. Although still controversial, high ALA intake has been linked to a higher prostate cancer risk. Until more is known, men are advised to choose a fish source for heart-healthy omega-3s instead of plant-sourced ALA.

2. Is (fill in the blank) more nutritious than white granulated sugar?

The blank can be honey, brown sugar, rock sugar, raw sugar, molasses, corn sugar, maple syrup, confectioner's sugar, cane sugar, evaporated cane juice, or any other sweetener. Some of the so-called natural sugars are less processed and, hence, retain a more robust flavor. Nutritionally, they are almost the same. They contain the same calories as white sugar and are metabolized the same way. Some natural sugars, such as honey and evaporated cane juice, contain minute amounts of minerals. Unless we eat a gigantic portion of these natural sugars daily, the difference in mineral content is insignificant. One reader once asked about choosing a sweetened soy drink for someone with diabetes, believing that soy drinks sweetened with natural sugar were healthier. We suggest that clients focus on eating less sugar listed.

3. Is (fill in the blank) healthier than soda?

Again, the blank here could be diet soda, juice, energy drinks, milk, black tea, herbal tea, green tea, iced tea, sparkling water, tonic water, or fruit smoothies. Some drinks are marketed as energy boosters, mental boosters, or calorie burners. The latest green tea buzz has confused the general public; when a new iced green tea was introduced recently, we received many questions about whether this was a soda or a tea. Some drinks are good thirst-quenchers, such as low-fat milk, unsweetened tea, natural juice, and bottled water. However, most others contain hidden calories or are simply water with artificial colorings and flavorings.

4. Is one form of calcium supplement better than another?

Calcium supplements are available in numerous forms: pill, capsule, enteric-coated pill, powder, liquid, or chewable. They may be synthetic, "natural from plant sources," "naturally occurring from oyster shell," or "natural from coral bed." In addition, they may be acidic, alkaline, or neutral in pH. They may also be bundled with vitamin D or K, magnesium, or glucosamine sulphate. No wonder people are confused!

The No. 1 complaint we receive about calcium supplements is pill size; generally, we find that clients are using large pills because they are choosing products that contain more than calcium. We may advise clients to revisit their reasons for taking calcium supplements. If it is to supplement their diet with calcium, they ought to base their choice on the amount of elemental calcium. While added nutrients (especially vitamin D) may aid calcium absorption, it is important to determine whether the extra ingredients reduce the amount of elemental calcium or render the pill too big to swallow.

5. Is organic better?

The advantages of eating foods containing fewer chemicals, pesticides, and hormones are certainly appealing. A decade ago, organic was a term mostly associated with produce, but this is no longer the case. Grocery aisles are filled with organic products, as many packaged products have an organic version. Packaged products labeled organic are not always healthier, such as organic candy, chips, frozen pizzas, and cola. In 2005, the U.S. organic industry reached \$14.6 billion in sales. It is one of the fastest-growing categories in the food industry, growing at roughly 20% annually. We try to educate clients that overall food choice is more important and that 3,000 calories from organic food is still 3,000 calories.

— Gloria Tsang, RD, has written articles for media such as Reuters, NBC and ABC affiliates, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *Reader's Digest Canada*, *iVillage*, and *USA Today*.