

# Do You Eat Well? Proper Nutrition for Health, Prevention, and Reversal of Disease

*By Emmy Vadnais, OTR/L*

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Part of the OT scope of practice is helping people eat healthy food, meal plan, and shop for and prepare well-balanced nutritional meals.<sup>1</sup> However, given the variety of information and new studies that seem to contradict older ones, many wonder, "What should I eat?"

## **Nutrition and Health**

According to Dean Ornish, MD, "Currently, over 75% of the \$2.8 trillion in health care costs are due to chronic diseases, such as coronary heart disease and type 2 diabetes, that can be largely prevented by making comprehensive lifestyle changes. We don't need to wait for a new drug or laser or high-tech breakthrough; we simply need to put into practice what we already know."

Ornish has spent 35 years researching how lifestyle choices impact our health, including what a person eats, how they handle stress, whether they smoke, how much they exercise, and how much love, intimacy and social support they have in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Poor eating habits are contributing to the obesity epidemic in the United States. About one-third of U.S. adults (33.8%) are obese, and approximately 17% (or 12.5 million) of children and adolescents ages 2-19 years are obese.<sup>3</sup>

Unhealthy eating habits and increased weight gain can create chronic diseases such as hypertension and type 2 diabetes, which are becoming more common in younger people. It's important to address eating habits in childhood, as they often carry into adulthood.<sup>4</sup>

The new Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020 and ChooseMyPlate.gov "emphasize the importance of creating a healthy eating pattern to maintain health and reduce the risk of disease. Everything we eat and drink -- the food and beverage choices we make day to day and over our lifetime -- matters."<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese Proverb "He who takes medicine and neglects to diet, wastes the skill of his doctors," and Hippocrates' famous quote "Let food be thy medicine, and medicine be thy food" apply to us even more today.

## **Food and Mood**

Food and drink not only affect our physical health, but they can impact mental and emotional well being. Stress, moods, and emotions can influence food choices. Poor choices can exacerbate negative feelings and emotions. If someone is stressed, they may eat sugary or unhealthy foods and caffeine that may contribute to sleeping poorly, creating a vicious cycle.<sup>5</sup>

Research has shown that children who had better nutritional supplements prenatally and during the first two years after birth were more active, involved and helpful than their peers, and less anxious. They were also better able to express both happy and sad emotions.<sup>6</sup>

Occupational therapist Michelle Bonang states, "In my 13-year career as a pediatric OT, I have seen a huge rise in developmental delays, attentional and behavioral difficulties, and increased sensory challenges in children. My referral list grows each year, and I whole-heartedly believe that many of the referrals would not be necessary if children's diets were altered. Children today are eating highly processed foods, immense amounts of refined sugar, and 'food' that in actuality is not food, on a daily basis, impacting their development and functioning. The positives that I have seen when parents change their child's diet to plant-based and whole-food are remarkable."

## **How to Eat Well**

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### How to Eat Well

I recently interviewed two occupational therapists who have turned their focus toward helping people incorporate better nutrition. They have studied and practiced healthy eating habits and nutrition more in depth than most OTs.

Tina Gilberti, OTR/L, Functional Diagnostic Practitioner, began studying nutrition for health when she was diagnosed with celiac disease over 15 years ago.

"While researching for my own personal healing, I learned about the gluten-free/casein-free diet being used with some success for kids on the autistic spectrum," said Gilberti. "At that time, this was the population I was working with in OT, so this sparked my interest. I began to teach families how to implement dietary changes and parents reported seeing some improvements in their child's behavior and



attention. This is when I realized the relevance of integrating nutrition into my OT practice to enhance patient outcomes."

Gilberti works with people with a variety of conditions and populations, but frequently works with children on the autism spectrum or those who suffer from chronic health conditions such as digestive problems or eczema.

"I also work with women who have autoimmune disease, anxiety/depression, [or] hormonal imbalances, or adults with chronic digestive complaints such as constipation, bloating, reflux/heartburn," she said. "Many of my clients have tried conventional treatment methods without success, and are looking to avoid medication or come off of medications."

Gilberti seeks the root cause of symptoms. "Although nutrition and diet are a big piece of intervention, I also look at environmental and lifestyle factors that are impacting on occupational performance and health and wellness," she said. "Identifying and correcting hidden imbalances and malfunctions, as well as making environmental and lifestyle modifications, can improve OT outcomes. For example, food sensitivities and environmental toxin exposure can cause arthritis and inflammation. Identifying and removing inflammatory foods and toxins can increase a person's mobility and decrease pain, improving a person's occupational performance and quality of life. Another example would be [that] improving a client's digestion/absorption and correcting nutrient imbalances can help improve mental, physical and cognitive function."

Gilberti described how she helped achieve positive outcomes with nutrition. "I worked with a 3-year old boy with autism who initially presented as an extremely picky eater," she said. "He ate only 5-8 foods, had severe constipation, was a poor sleeper (woke from 2 to 5 a.m. every night) and was nonverbal. The mom was extremely stressed and required a lot of support and coaching. I recommended an anti-inflammatory diet (no grains or gluten, dairy, refined sugars, or processed foods), made environmental changes (i.e., eliminated toxins in toys and self-care products), and lifestyle recommendations (i.e., modified sleep routine/environment, provided sensory/motor/exercises). After about two months, he started eating a greater variety of foods (20+ whole foods, including some vegetables), slept through the night 80% of the time, and had bowel movements daily, without medication. He also improved in his motor planning skills with a new ability and interest in climbing playground equipment, and started to say a few words and make new sounds."

Cathy Hohmeyer, OTR/L, has studied nutrition due to her passion with healthy foods. "When [I was] becoming an OT, nutrition was not addressed specifically," she said. "My own studies brought me to the work by Dr. Weston Price, who studied truly healthy populations around the world for 10 years. These real foods and food preparations totally integrated with the way I was cooking already, and gave me the answer to why people in my dining room loved the food -- it was made with whole foods and whole processes. The body can tell when it is getting the foods that work together synergistically! As I studied the 11 common food processes, I realized that these were also the basis of the healing foods that many are finally learning about today."

Hohmeyer adds that old fads such as eating low fat have actually created ill health.

She created a holistic resort in her hometown, Lake Clear Lodge and Retreat, where she became operator and executive chef.

"I have been a Weston A. Price Foundation (WAPF) Chapter Leader for close to 10 years now," said Hohmeyer. "Sally Fallon, who created the international WAPF, is coming to my lodge early this summer to kick off a week-long series of cooking, health and good foods."

Hohmeyer is developing a program based on holistic nourishment. She offers cooking classes on a variety of topics on healthy and easy dishes, as well as the real foods preparations at her resort. She is developing more retreats that incorporate real foods.

She has conducted dozens of culturing and fermenting workshops at many places, including her lodge and fairs, and has sold culturing kits to people who are incorporating cultured and probiotic foods into their life. She teaches classes on healing foods such as bone broths and culturing with the Holistic Health Transformation Program at [www.learnitlive.com](http://www.learnitlive.com) under Dr. Karen Kan. She plans to integrate healing foods programs in OT schools.

### **Simple Ways to Integrate Nutrition into OT**

Gilberti says there are simple ways OTs can encourage a healthy diet. "The number-one thing that OTs can start to implement, with any population, is to encourage clients to eat whole, unprocessed foods, focusing on healthy proteins, healthy fats and vegetables (eat the colors of the rainbow), with 1-2 pieces of fruit a day," she says. "The second thing OTs can do is encourage clients to eat healthy fats (cold first-pressed coconut oil, avocado oil, olive oil) and eliminate unhealthy fats (trans fats/hydrogenated fats, soy, corn and canola oils)."

Gilberti will be offering training for OTs this spring on Integrating Nutrition and Epigenetics into OT Practice. You can learn more about Tina Gilberti, OTR/L, FDN, at [www.fdnholisticwellness](http://www.fdnholisticwellness) or follow her on Facebook at Functional Nutrition and Holistic Wellness.

Hohmeyer recommends reading the book *Nourishing Traditions for Children* as it is simple to follow. Then, read the lengthier and complete *Nourishing Traditions* by Sally Fallon, and *Nourishing Broth* by Sally Fallon and Kaayla T. Daniel. Additional resources are The BodyMind Institute and the website and books from Weston A. Price Foundation.

Hohmeyer recommends that OTs learn more about illnesses that come from an imbalance in microbes, to support the microbiome through culturing foods and drink, and to release trapped emotions that hinder healing. Learn more about Cathy Hohmeyer, OTR/L, at [www.oldworldkitchen.net](http://www.oldworldkitchen.net) and [www.lodgeonlakeclear.com](http://www.lodgeonlakeclear.com).

"Fed Up," "Bought," and "In Defense of Food" are current films that show how to eat well and the impact of nutrition on our health and the environment.

**To learn more and connect with OTs interested in mind, body, and spirit medicine, prevention, and wellness, visit the [www.HolisticOT.org](http://www.HolisticOT.org) website, the Holistic**

**Occupational Therapy Page and group on Facebook, LinkedIn, HolisticOT on Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram, and join the Holistic OT e-mail list.**

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