6 things doctors wish patients knew about better nutrition

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Nutrition is the foundation of good health, playing a crucial role in improving quality of life. Yet many people in the U.S. don’t eat a healthy diet, which increases risk for obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and other health conditions. That is why it is important to follow proper eating patterns that include nutritious foods and drinks. But with so much conflicting information about what constitutes such a diet, it can be challenging to know where to begin.

The AMA’s What Doctors Wish Patients Knew™ series provides physicians with a platform to share what they want patients to understand about today’s health care headlines. Here is a to-do list drawn from the series on what doctors wish patients knew about making better nutrition decisions.

1. **Cut intake of ultraprocessed foods**
   For people on the run, ultraprocessed food may become their go-to diet, sacrificing nutrition for convenience. The problem is that consuming ultraprocessed foods on a regular basis increases one’s risk of cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, obesity and type 2 diabetes, among other things. But it can be hard to tell when these foods are on your plate. Two physicians took time to discuss what patients need to know about ultraprocessed foods and healthier steps to take.

2. **Reduce sodium consumption**
   While sodium is an essential nutrient, most people consume too much and are not even aware they are doing so. The body needs a small amount of sodium to work properly, but in excess it can increase a person’s risk for developing high blood pressure, which can
lead to heart disease and stroke. That is why it is important to understand where most salt intake comes from and how to lower it. Learn more about sodium consumption and how to lower salt intake.

3 Limit alcoholic beverages
During the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, some people became their own bartenders and progressed into heavier drinking patterns to cope with pandemic anger, stress and anxiety. Here is what patients need to know about unhealthy alcohol use and how to break the cycle of comfort or binge drinking.

4 Make healthy food choices
With so many fad diets and food recommendations out there, it can be hard for patients to navigate what to eat and what not to eat. Two physicians took time to discuss what they wish patients knew about healthy eating.

5 Know your caffeine limits
Many people can’t imagine starting their day without a cup of coffee or tea. Consuming caffeine can even help people get through that afternoon slump. About 85% of adults consume 135 milligrams of caffeine daily in the U.S. This is equivalent to 12 ounces of coffee, which is the most common source of caffeine for adults. Yet while caffeine is often talked about for its negative effect on sleep and anxiety, it can offer some benefits too. Three physicians share what to know about caffeine.

6 Take note of vitamins and supplements
While vitamins and nutritional or dietary supplements can be beneficial to your health, they can also involve health risks. Notably, the Food and Drug Administration does not have the authority to review dietary supplement products for safety and effectiveness before they are marketed. And with more than 90,000 different supplements on the market, it can be confusing to understand what is safe and what is not. Two physicians took time to discuss what doctors wish patients knew about vitamins and nutritional supplements.

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