Ask our experts

THE RIGHT START

We invite our readers to ask a natural therapist their burning questions. **Gemma Hurditch** is our expert for this issue, for the College of Naturopathic Medicine

Q What tips can you give me for bringing up vegan children. My kids are three and six months and I want to ensure that they are getting as healthy start as possible whilst staying true to my ethics.

A In a vegan diet, the nutrients that you have to keep a careful eye on are vitamins B12 and D, omega 3, iron, zinc and calcium. Investigate the nutrient content of the foods you are serving and adjust as necessary. Keeping up protein intake and healthy fats is particularly important to supply adequate energy and the building blocks for repair and growth.

Try unhulled tahini spread which is much more nutrient dense than the hulled type and is a rich source of calcium and other minerals, plus healthy fats which is really good for growing bodies. Some kids don't go for the slightly bitter taste, so mix together with a natural peanut butter or jam to counter this, or add to berry or banana smoothies. If you are looking after your nutrition, breastfeeding your baby for as long as possible is good practice. Vitamin B12 will need to be supplemented as there is inadequate evidence that spirulina or other non-animal sourced vitamin B12 foods provide a bioactive form of the vitamin. Methylated B12 oral sprays are most readily absorbed. A vitamin D supplement in liquid form is also a wise investment for your children and yourself.

Q My mum has been diagnosed with osteoporosis. Can you tell me how I can help support her with diet?

A Following an anti-inflammatory whole food diet supports overall health and may reduce the progression of disease - reduce red meat, dairy, alcohol, table salt, caffeine, cola and sugar. Greens, fruit and vegetables, plenty of filtered water and anti-inflammatory spices such as turmeric, ginger, oregano and cinnamon should be consumed daily.

Bone is living tissue and relies on a constant supply of nutrients - calcium, magnesium, boron, zinc and vitamin K are crucial. To target these nutrients, encourage her to eat plenty of almonds, tinned sardines with bones, leafy green vegetables such as kale, pumpkin seeds and tahini.

Daily intake of prunes is associated with improved bone formation, but can also cause bowel irritation, so slowly increase intake to 10 prunes a day. Higher protein intake is also linked to better bone density, focus on oily fish such as sardines, mackerel, anchovies and herring which will also provide vitamin D, necessary for calcium absorption. Legumes, nuts and seeds, eggs and tempeh are also great protein sources. Improving digestion by sipping a teaspoon of organic apple cider vinegar in 150ml of water at mealtimes can assist with mineral absorption.

Q Is it true that sugar is addictive? What is the best way to wean my six year old son off the sugary snacks he loves?

A Children naturally tend to have a sweet tooth - sugar infers calories, and calories are required for growth. The sweet flavour is preferred from infancy, unlike salt for example, which is an acquired taste. The sweet taste also acts as a natural pain reliever and lights up reward and pleasure areas in the brain. It is considered by many experts to be addictive.

Ditch from your pantry - fruit drinks, soda, white flour products and sweets. Calmly offer the foods you'd like him to eat. You are unlikely to rewire his taste buds but if the sweet foods are also nutrient dense that is much better for growth and health. Frozen banana 'ice-cream' can be blended up - sprinkle some chopped hazelnuts and cinnamon on top, or try goodies made on Medjool dates, coconut, avocado, nut butters and cacao.

Combine healthy fats and protein with natural sweetness. A trip to a naturopath could detect any issues such as candida which may be contributing to his desire for sweet foods. The desire for sweet foods indicates the growth period in children as their tolerance for sweetness reduces around the time rapid skeletal growth stops.

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