



Food for thought

Did you know that the choices you make every day affect a lot more than your waistline? Domini Stuart reports.

Would you like to improve your work performance? Increase concentration? Enhance your memory? Reduce stress? No, this is not an ad. for the latest wonder drug – they’re four good reasons for eating breakfast.

“Studies overseas have found that skipping breakfast is associated with reduced problem solving ability and poor memory,” says Dr Janet Bryan, who recently led a CSIRO study into the links between diet, mood and brain function.. “A high carbohydrate breakfast, including foods such as cereals and fruit, is likely to improve some aspects of memory which we often rely on when under pressure.”

The food effect doesn’t stop with breakfast. "Scientific studies in Australia and overseas suggest that the nutrients we get from a balanced diet help the brain to process information," continues Dr Bryan. “What and when we eat can affect our mental performance all through the day.”

Finding a balance

According to CSIRO nutritionists, a balanced diet means a daily intake of at least 5 serves of breads and cereals, 7 of vegetables and fruit, 2 of milk and milk products and one serve of meat or meat alternatives. It sounds easy enough – unless running a business means you already feel there aren’t enough hours in the day.

“It really can be hard to find time to think about what you’re going to eat, then do the shopping and the preparation,” says Dianne Woods, a qualified nutritionist and executive officer of the NSW division of the non-government, non-profit community organisation Nutrition Australia. “Busy executives tend to rush off without breakfast, then rely on take-away and fast food throughout the day.

“If you have a meeting in a coffee shop, you’re likely to fill up on pastries or muffins,” she continues. “If you’re grabbing lunch on the run, you might choose a pie simply because it’s hot and ready to go rather than wait while someone makes a salad sandwich for you.”

When you're in a hurry, it's tempting to put food last on your list of priorities. However, time saved in this way today could prove very expensive in the future.

The high cost of a poor diet

As far back as 1989-90, absenteeism, illness and premature deaths due to diet-related diseases were costing Australian business \$746 million a year. In the USA, it's been found that employees who are 40% overweight are absent from work twice as often as the average worker. In terms of cold, hard cash, healthy staff are healthy for business. It makes sound financial sense to eat well, and to encourage your employees to do the same.

One option is to offer a Nutrition Promotion Programs in your workplace. Run by Nutrition Australia, the programs are designed to help you and your staff improve your eating habits, reduce the risk of health problems and improve morale and well-being.

"We suggest ways to make the healthy choice an easy choice," says Woods. "For instance, if you're eating at your computer, even when you feel like fruit you might pick at biscuits or chips because you don't want to get juice all over your keyboard. If you take just a couple of minutes to cut up the fruit and then eat it with a fork, the problem is solved.

"We also recommend finding one little area to change and starting with that," Woods continues. "If you try to do everything at once, you're more likely to feel it's all too hard, lose interest and give up completely."

Eating for pleasure

With a fast-growing food business and four-year-old twin boys clamouring for attention, Anmarie Dabinet and Steve Ingram are no strangers to the challenge of balancing work and home. "We understand that busy people just don't have time to cook every evening," says Ingram, "but that shouldn't mean they have to miss out on good food.

"Paradise Beach Purveyors is all about making good food easy – the kind of food you'd love to prepare at home if only you had the opportunity. Simple and wholesome, yes – but also food that give real pleasure."

Most of Ingram's dips are naturally low in fat and would fit comfortably into any everyday healthy eating regime. However, he makes no apologies for including a couple of richer patés and mousses into the range. "Eating well is not about depriving yourself," he says "You can eat anything you want in moderation – a teaspoon of something you really enjoy can be much more satisfying than a plateful of something that's had all the goodness and flavour drained out in the name of cutting kilojoules."

Enjoying the occasional treat is also encouraged by scientists at the CSIRO. "Scientific evidence suggests that a high carbohydrate snack in the afternoon, say around 4pm, may help maintain concentration," says Dr Bryan. "And it's OK to reward yourself with an occasional biscuit, piece

of cake or glass of wine. Our nutritional guidelines allow for 2 'indulgences' per day, as long as you're eating a balanced diet."

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Easy ways to healthier eating

If 1 is a deep fried chocolate bar and 10 is an organic mixed salad, where would you rate your average meal? If it's lower than you'd like, there are some remarkably easy ways to boost the nutritional value of just about everything you eat. You don't have to aim for perfection; taking small, easy steps is a great way to start changing old habits. For instance...

Cheese sandwich made with white, buttered bread	3
Make it wholegrain bread	4
With no butter	5
Add tomato	6
Add salad	10
Meat pie with hot chips or fries	1
Meat pie with baked potato, a little butter	3
Meat pie with baked potato, no butter and salad	6
As above, but eat only half of the pastry	8
Pasta with creamy bacon and mushroom sauce	4
Pasta with a tomato-based bacon and mushroom sauce	6
Replace the bacon with vegetables	9
Add salad	10

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