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Eating Your Way To Better Health How Important is Nutrition for Sjogren's Syndrome?

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Introduction

As proper nutrition has received growing attention over the last decade, we have all listened more carefully when experts tell us that "you are what you eat". Fad diets promise to help us lose unwanted pounds, while herbal supplements guarantee to give us more energy, help us sleep better and improve our memory. As more "nutritional" messages bombard us, it is more important than ever to be educated and informed consumers. For those with Sjogren's syndrome, medical complications make it even more important to be aware of the relationship between diet and the symptoms of this chronic condition. Just how important is nutrition to Sjogren's syndrome?

Kristine Napier, a registered dietician and author of *Power Nutrition for Your Chronic Illness* (McMillan, 1998) and *Eat to Heal* (Warner Books, 1998) says "Very!"

Following is a reprint from part of a chapter in her latest book, *Power Nutrition for Your Chronic Illness*, on Sjogren's syndrome.

When it comes to nutrition, Sjogren's syndrome can have many negative effects, including:

- The inability to eat drier foods, due to the lack of saliva
- Tooth decay and earlier tooth loss, which decreases the ability to chew and eat
- The proper absorption of nutrients, thereby increasing the need for some nutrients
- The need for increased nutrient intake to recover from mouth infections, which are a common concern for people with Sjogren's syndrome

In addition, because Sjogren's syndrome is an autoimmune system disease, everyone with this condition should eat for a healthy immune system.

Eat For A Healthy Immune System

The immune system is the body's way of fighting off foreign invaders such as bacteria, viruses and allergies. In people with autoimmune diseases, though, the immune system somehow goes awry. While taking large amounts of certain nutrients isn't a way to boost the immune system, making sure you are well nourished in general is an excellent way to make sure the immune system is as healthy as it can be. Some of the nutrients that are especially important to a healthy immune system (as well as foods high in that nutrient) include:

- Protein: milk, cheese, meat, legumes (such as lentils).
- Zinc: good sources include seafood, meats, whole grains legumes.

- Iron: red meat (the best source), fish, poultry, legumes, nuts and seeds, whole grains.
- Manganese: whole grains
- Copper: legumes, meats, seafood, shellfish, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, green vegetables, avocados and bananas are good sources.
- Selenium: protein-rich foods such as lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs, lentils, split peas, and other legumes, milk, tofu and cheese are good source of selenium, as are whole grains. One of the richest sources is Brazil nuts.
- Vitamin B1: chicken, fish, pork, eggs, liver, whole grains, legumes, avocados, bananas
- Riboflavin: meat, poultry, fish eggs and dairy products
- Folic Acid: dark green leafy vegetables, such as romaine lettuce and spinach, orange juice.
- Vitamin B12: this vitamin is found only in foods of animal origin, including meats, seafood, dairy products and eggs.
- Thiamin: whole grains, legumes, seeds, pork and brewer's yeast.
- Vitamin C: citrus fruits, tomatoes, broccoli, cantaloupe, berries, cabbage, asparagus, green and red sweet peppers.
- Vitamin A: sweet potatoes, carrots, evaporated skim milk, apricot nectar, liver, part skim ricotta cheese, cantaloupe, tomatoes, squash, spinach.
- Vitamin E: asparagus, beet greens, broccoli, cabbage, mustard greens, soybeans, spinach, tomatoes, hams, almonds, peanut butter, sunflower seeds, blueberries, papaya, quinoa, wheat germ, tuna steak, salmon, sole, shrimp.
- Fatty Acids: The human body needs a certain amount of special fats called essential fatty acids; most people get enough fatty acids if they get just 15 grams of fat per day. On the other hands, diets that have too much fat are thought to suppress the immune system. Therefore, it is suggested that people with autoimmune diseases eat a low-fat diet, or one in which no more than 20 to 30% (with the low end more commonly recommended) of calories of fat.

As you can see, the list of nutrients important to the immune system is quite long. That's why it is so important to eat a diet that supplies all essential nutrients, including plenty of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, protein foods and dairy foods.

A word to the wise: just because some is good, doesn't mean that a little more is better. While you may be tempted to load up on vitamins in attempt to boost your immune system, consider the results of studies with zinc. Researchers know that zinc is an essential ingredient in a healthy immune system. In one study, research subjects were given high doses of zinc (many times the Recommended Dietary Allowance). Instead of boosting the immune system, these high doses actually suppressed it (as measured by the population of lymphocytes in the bloodstream, which are one type of white blood cell.) Similarly, in animal studies, the right amount of manganese helped study animals have a normal immune response, but an overdose suppressed their immune system. The best advice? Stick to the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) for nutrients, concentrating on getting these nutrients from a healthy diet, rather than from supplements.

Not Enough Saliva

While most people don't even think about it, saliva is absolutely necessary for the ability to eat. For people with Sjogren's syndrome, a lack of saliva makes a normal eating style difficult to impossible. Here are some suggestions to compensate for the lack of saliva:

- Keep your mouth moist by frequently sipping sugar-free liquids, especially water.
- Eat moister foods, such as soups, stews, meat with gravy and sauces. Some foods that you may want to emphasise are custards, macaroni and cheese, creamy cooked cereals (but cook them with milk to increase the protein content), and soups.
- Avoid spicy spices such as pepper, chilli powder, nutmeg and cloves. People who have dry mouths often develop sores or infections in their mouths, and these spices can be very irritating.
- Avoid orange and grapefruit juices when you have sores in your mouth or if your mouth is just always so dry that these things bother you consistently.
- Dip dry foods such as cookies and crackers in milk, coffee or tea to help you chew and swallow them.
- When eating drier foods, drink fluids frequently to aid in chewing and swallowing.

Nutrient Malabsorption

When Sjogren's affects the large and small intestine, it can result in malabsorption, or a condition in which the intestinal tract fails to absorb all the nutrients in food. Even if the disease process itself doesn't cause malabsorption, eating poorly and taking in too little of certain nutrients can cause malabsorption syndrome. Whatever the cause, when this happens, the intestine becomes less efficient at absorbing nutrients and instead shuttles them through the body unabsorbed. In addition, people may not absorb as many calories, causing them to lose excessive amounts of weight. To counteract nutrient malabsorption:

- Take a multivitamin and mineral supplement daily, which might actually improve malabsorption:
- Try not to eat empty-calorie foods, opting instead for nutrient-rich foods. For example, instead of eating relatively low nutrition ice cream, opt instead for yoghurt into which you've sliced fresh fruit, such as a banana. Instead of white rice, choose brown rice; substitute a sweet potato for a white potato. If you mash potatoes, mash in some cottage cheese or low-fat cream cheese (low-fat because it's higher in protein.)
- Ask your doctor if you should avoid any particular food. For example, if you have severe malabsorption, you may temporarily lose the ability to digest the sugar in milk and milk products, causing temporary lactose intolerance. As a result, you can suffer even worse malabsorption. When this occurs, it may be necessary to cut back or eliminate milk from the diet temporarily.

More information on tooth decay, fighting mouth infections, and sample menus with recipes are available in *Power Nutrition for your Chronic Illness*.