

Dr Nicholas Finer - Interview

Interviewer:

How do I know Doctor, if I'm eating a healthy diet?

Dr Nicholas Finer: People who are having a healthy diet usually feel well and good about themselves. They're usually not overweight, and they will be having a good variety of foods including fruit, vegetables and the right balance of starchy foods without too much fat.

IN: Now, doctors are always talking about the right balance and this sort of thing. Just give me a quick rule of thumb as to how one knows whether one is eating a healthy diet or not.

NF: Well the easiest way is to put all of the food that you eat in one day on a plate. A third of that plate should be fruit and vegetables; a third of that plate should be starchy foods - bread, potatoes or pasta, without fat, and the other third of the plate should be a balance of the meat that we eat, the fish that we eat, some of the snacks that we have, and some of the dairy produce.

IN: Do you think that we eat too much?

NF: I think we're all eating more than we need for the amount of exercise and activity that we do, and that's why most of us are getting fatter and that's why half of the population is actually overweight or obese.

IN: Now, is exercise an important factor in keeping your weight under control?

NF: Exercise and activity is really an important way of trying to keep your weight under control, and also for keeping yourself healthy in other ways. The problem is we're spending so little energy in our day to day life, we have to think about putting exercise and activity back in.

IN: If you look at a plate of food, which are the villains?

NF: The two main villains are fat and refined sugar. Fat gives us calories that we don't need, it's there everywhere, even if it's not just the bits of fat you cut off the edge of meat, it's inside the meat, it's in the manufactured goods, it's in the oils that we have. Refined sugar is also a problem. A lot of the foods that we eat, the sugar is added to it, and of course we often have a lot of sugar in terms of the drinks that we have.

IN: Tell us a little bit about sweetened drinks.

NF: Well, sweetened drinks really can have sweetness from I think one of three sources. One can be from fruits like fruit juices or fruit squashes where the sugar comes from the fruit itself - it's still sugar. The second are drinks where sugar is added and that's an ever growing part of the drinks that we have. And the third are drinks which are sweetened with a sweetener like aspartame where there is no sugar, but there is still that taste of sweetness.

IN: And if you were giving parents a choice in the matter, what would you prefer them to do?

NF: I think that the choice is between modest amounts of natural fruit drinks, or if you're having the diet soda type of drink, one that's been sweetened with something like aspartame.

The problem with children drinking too much in the way of sugar sweetened drinks is one - that they're getting calories that they don't need and it's not providing good nutrition in other ways. The second thing is that we know that sugar can obviously cause tooth decay. The problem is that if children drink very large amounts even of natural fruit juices, it's still providing them with more sugar than they need, albeit sugars that arise naturally in fruit.

IN: I wonder sometimes whether people have any idea of the amount of fat that they're actually carrying around.

NF: Well, I've got an example of it here... This is 5 pounds of body fat - a model of it, it's quite frightening how much there seems to be there, it doesn't occur all in one lump like this in the body, it's distributed in and amongst the tissues in your tummy, around those spare tyres and other places. This is the problem that as doctors we're dealing, is too much of this in our bodies.