

EP 10 Diet & Nutrition_mixdown.mp3

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah Walker [00:00:06] Hello and welcome back to our BeWell Podcasts. Today we're going to discuss the impact of diet and nutrition on our wellbeing. Joining me today, I have Alex Johnstone from the Rowett Institute and students Georgia-May, Lisa-Marie, Kaleigh and Godlin. Can we do some quick introductions, so our listeners know who you are and why you volunteered to be part of our podcast today?

Alex Johnstone [00:00:26] Hi, Rebekah. So, I'm a professor of human nutrition at The Rowett Institute. And I'm Alex, and I have been looking forward to some great discussion today. Thanks for the invitation.

Georgia-May Drennan [00:00:40] Hi, Rebekah. I'm Georgia-May and I'm a fourth-year student and I study English Literature and French.

Lisa-Marie Schuchardt [00:00:46] Hi, I'm Lisa-Marie. I'm originally from Germany and I'm doing my Masters of Law here in Aberdeen.

Kaleigh Innes [00:00:54] Hi, I'm Kaleigh. I'm in third year and I'm studying Psychology and Sociology, and I'm here because I find it quite an interesting topic, so I'm happy to be involved.

Godlin Mathew [00:01:04] Hiya, and I'm Godlin and I study Psychology and I've just always wanted to be part of the podcast.

Bekah Walker [00:01:11] Brilliant. Thanks guys. Thank you so much for joining me. I'm really looking forward to our discussions today. So our physical wellbeing is not just about keeping active, it also includes our diets, what we eat, and what we drink. Our diets are all diverse. Some maybe plant based. Others may have to watch out for allergens or intolerances. Others may watch and track what they eat, and others might eat exactly what they want when they want. Regardless of our differences in our diets, all of our diets have things in common. What we eat, reflects how we look, how we feel and how we function day to day. So what is a good diet? Should we focus on maintaining the balance or is following a strict diet plan the desired the way to go?

Godlin Mathew [00:01:55] I think a balanced diet because I love eating healthily, but occasionally I do love a bit of chocolate, just to treat myself after eating well for a while.

Georgia-May Drennan [00:02:09] Yeah, I think a lot of my friends could maybe describe me as like a cereal dieter from when I was younger. When I say younger, I mean like just after going to university, because I was never actually focussed on diet in terms of nutrition. It was more just what I would want to eat, and it was never really unhealthy. But I would always like to try a new kind of fad or crash diets that were out. And I think I finally realised at 22 that it's just really important that the old saying is true. You know, moderation is key. Everything in moderation is probably the healthiest solution long term and the most sustainable.

Kaleigh Innes [00:02:50] I think it's important to have it quite balanced. I think when you focus too much on being healthy, what I found is that because I'm depriving myself of

certain foods such as chocolate, which is always my weak point and I will end up kind of binging it, so have a balanced diet, but don't be too strict with yourself at the same time.

Alex Johnstone [00:03:10] So it's Alex here. What I would like to say is that, I think a balanced diet is really important because not only does it keep our body healthy but can help us feel our best too. And I think it's important to remember that not one single food contains all the nutrients that you require for a healthy diet. And that's why we've got something like the eat well guide that gives us advice as to what we should be eating, which is a range of fruit and vegetables, starchy products, dairy proteins and fats and oils, and then keeping the sort of high energy, sugar and sweet treats, as treats. And then last but not least, remembering about hydration. So I think that somebody said earlier that moderation was important, and I think that's quite right. So we don't really, as nutritionists classify foods as good foods or bad foods. We think about a range of foods that can contribute towards a healthy diet.

Lisa-Marie Schuchardt [00:04:23] I think it can really differ for people because I feel like when you enter a state, when you find really, I would say food freedom, where you just know what works for you, what your body needs, how you nutrition your body, it's really freeing. But I personally know a lot of people, myself included, who went through phases like sort of following certain diets because I worked in the fitness industry for six years. But since I'm not working anymore I feel like there's literally a weight lifted off my shoulders because now I don't need to look a certain way at a certain time and I can just eat how I feel my best and look how I want to look right now. So I really think that's the kind of freedom that we all should try for.

Bekah Walker [00:05:15] Yeah, I completely agree with what you guys say, and I'm definitely a firm believer in balance because like you say, if you're starving yourself of the food that you really enjoy, your treats, then you are going to go on a binge. And I've been guilty of doing that myself, trying to be really strict and maybe watch my weight. So you just try and cut out all the bad things as such and it's completely not sustainable. And I kind of like to look at it as a lifestyle change. So I might have a good day when I eat some really good foods and I might have a day, when I don't eat such good foods. But over the course of the week, it's kind of balanced itself out and it is totally around balance. And I suppose the key to remember is that, as Alex said, there's no good foods or bad foods because not any one single food will contain all the nutrients and stuff that we need for our healthy, balanced diet. And I think there is a lot of talk around the, you know, our physical health and our diets. And everyone kind of knows the connotations of maybe not eating a healthy diet and the fact that can have on your physical health, but something that's not spoken about enough, I think, is the link between mental health and our diet. So we kind of talked a little bit already on what we eat, can improve our mood, give us energy and help us to think more clearly. What are your thoughts? And have you guys noticed differences in your moods when you eat certain foods or when you don't eat certain foods? And does the timing of meals make any difference at all?

Lisa-Marie Schuchardt [00:06:49] Okay, so maybe following up of what I just said, like there was a time for me when I just went to bed hungry and I couldn't sleep because I was so hungry, but I already had my calorie limit for the day. So I just basically told myself, okay, now you just have to get through it until you have a reset the next day. And it makes you honestly miserable, like you're grumpy all the time. You don't have a lot of energy and it really doesn't brighten your mood. And no, quite the opposite, actually. So I feel like the more stress you have upon your life, the better it is to not forget, to eat, to eat something that makes you feel good, that's nutritious, that makes you satisfied as well. Because for

me, that's the point where I thrive to most also academically and also personally. And I feel like the timing of meals is really individual. Like I'm a person who cannot eat lots of big meals, so I prefer to have smaller meals. But for example, I usually have lunch around 11:00 AM because that's the time I when I've been already studying for three hours and I get hungry again. So I feel like it's really individual when you want to eat and how much you want to eat when you have a meal.

Alex Johnstone [00:08:03] So I think this is a fascinating topic to think about, how the food that we eat can impact on our brain and this is what I call the food-gut brain access. And this is really an evolving area of research. And I suppose to try and summarise it, what my views are is that from what I can see, is that healthy eating patterns like the Mediterranean diet tend to be associated with better mental health than the unhealthy eating pattern such as the Western diet. But we certainly need a lot more research to try and understand the mechanisms that link food and mental wellbeing just to try and determine how and when nutrition can be used to improve mental health. And I think it was really interesting there that Lisa-Marie mentioned the timing of eating because that is something I am interested in as well, and some of us maybe do have more early morning type chronotype, sort of up with the lark and then some of us maybe have a sort of owl type chronotype, so we are more an evening type person, and that certainly does exist. And that's something I'm interested in is how not just what we eat but when we eat can influence our health and wellbeing. I think it's a really fascinating area of research.

Georgia-May Drennan [00:09:30] I think food definitely has an impact on mental health and how you're thinking, and I think also in the culture that we live in nowadays, there's so much on social media of what you should be doing and what foods you should be eating. And I think it's actually so important, you know, nutrition and diet are such an individual thing and we all know what works for ourselves. But I think it's really important to learn for yourself and to see your own changes because it will increase your confidence. Somebody once said to me, be your own scientist. And I think that's a really good way of looking at it. You know, just have a play about with what works for you and find where you're happy. But I also think, I mean the idea of being on a diet and restricting yourself, if there's over restriction, it can feel like or lead to punishment or, you know, mentally, if you're thinking why I shouldn't be eating this. It doesn't matter, you know, and if you have that constant kind of nag in your head, this is bad what I'm doing and so I think it really is about reprogramming your brain as well, you know? So what you had a bit of chocolate. You know, you can do something else tomorrow. And I just think it definitely has a big impact on it. And I think whether it's a good impact or a bad impact is all about how our mindsets are towards it.

Godlin Mathew [00:10:56] Yeah, I think that's a great point, because it's strong to emphasise, like, how every body is different and we all need different nutrition and diet plans and not to compare ourselves to other people, which is highly done in social media right now.

Kaleigh Innes [00:11:12] I definitely think the timing of meals I've noticed is more important as well. I think that when it reaches a certain point at night, like I have got a tendency to get quite hungry and I tend to think of like maybe say crisps or chocolate, which is not obviously the best thing to eat at that time of night, but sometimes you do enjoy. But I've noticed that at that time when I'm eating that things and after I kind of feel like worse for it. So some nights I will enjoy it and I'll indulge but others I do try to not as much, at least just for the time of night really, more than anything. I think as well, junk food

at night can really leave me going to bed at least, in quite like a negative sort of mindset. I don't know why.

Bekah Walker [00:12:09] Yeah, absolutely. I'm definitely guilty of binge eating junk food in the evening, and I'm a firm believer that that's down to the fact that I'm tired. So I'm craving something to spike my energy, you know, because my blood sugar has dropped or I've maybe not had enough nutrition throughout the day. So I'm like really craving something sugary and fatty. So I just need that energy spike to kind of get me through. And often it does. It works and, you know, spikes my energy. I feel a little bit more alert, but then that can be a bad thing if I eat that too close to bed because, you know, I'm not really doing anything with the energy as such either. And like you say as well, it can make you feel groggy as well. If you have had it, it feels good in the moment but then afterwards it's you know, it's been that fast release of energy. And I suppose we should be trying to aim for the slow release of energy in our food to kind of keep us maintained during the day. And as well, I think something that I don't do enough is I don't drink enough water and enough fluid, and that really can create a brain fog and make it really difficult for me to concentrate in the day. And I think like water and fluid is so important in terms of like our digestive system as well, that really helps to aid our digestive system. And if we're not putting enough water into our bodies, then that can tire us down as well and just make us feel really sluggish and lethargic. So it definitely like makes such an impact. Like I really find that food impacts my mental health more than my physical health. I mean, I'm quite an active person, so I have that, that I'm eating and I'm burning the energy as such. But I do notice a difference when I make a conscious effort to try and get like even some parts of my five a day, like I'm not going to get my five a day every day. I'm not a huge lover of fruit and veg but even if I just try and have like one extra bit, like just the fibre can make such a difference to my wellbeing and body. Do you guys have any more thoughts on your personal experiences in terms of mental health and diet or even physical health?

Alex Johnstone [00:14:17] So it's Alex again, I think, and it's interesting to reflect, we probably all do have our own food and mood associated habits and it's important to remember that we've learned these. So eating is a form of behaviour and it's a form of learned behaviour. So often you said, Rebekah, if you feel tired and you feel that you need a boost of energy, then that drop in glucose is a physiological response and then if you have something like a common one would be chocolate or perhaps caffeine or both, and then that gives you the instant energy and then you maybe feel better after that. And then you kind of associate the positive effects of the rise in glucose with eating a particular food. So that's quite a common one I've described there. But certainly for me, one of my food traits is not in the evening, but it's actually first thing in the morning and everybody knows that I have to have a cup of coffee and I feel so much better and that really gets me going. So that's something I've learned that that caffeine boost first thing in the morning really has such a positive influence on me. But just as I learned that then I could learn other different food associated traits and of course, our appetite can change. And that's entirely subjective. And what might be a treat for you, whether it's cheese, whether it's something salty or whether it's something sweet, is going to be different from person to person. And that's what's so fascinating, isn't it?

Bekah Walker [00:16:06] Yeah, absolutely, it is different for everyone, and I suppose everyone's palate is different as well. So, for example, I would not eat like a full salad bowl because to me that just isn't enjoyable, but I would have a side salad with like something else so that I'm still trying to get my nutrients in, but in different ways. I'm not thinking I have to eat this salad because I'm told this is a good thing to eat so I should be eating it, but instead I'll break it down and have something else with what I'm really fancying and

what I want and then have like the salad on the side. So I suppose it's kind of about making the small changes where we can as well in our diet to help our mental health and physical health. Like I always feel good when I've eaten like salad, I'm like ooh I had salad, but I have had that on the side with something else as well. So I do feel that that makes such a difference to our mental health as well. And physically, just like, I don't know, there's something about having something fresh, like fresh cold salad. It just makes you feel better, more hydrated, more nourished, like you've got so much more energy as well. And I guess that kind of leads us on quite nicely to looking a little bit at food labels on nutritional value of food. So I guess that's exactly what our food label does. It tells us what we're eating, and there will be a recommended serving size and cooking method to help us make healthier choices when we're buying our food. So in the United Kingdom, we follow a traffic light system. So, for example, if you see a green label on your food, it'll mean that the food is low in either fat, salt, unsaturated and saturated fats. I mean if it's low it's probably a healthier choice. Then you obviously have amber, which would go into medium, which means that's fine as part of your balanced diet. And then if you see red, then maybe try not to have that so often in your diet. So are food nutritional labels something that you guys consider when you're shopping, or are you purely driven by the price of food?

Kaleigh Innes [00:18:08] I think food labels are definitely beneficial for in the sense of maintaining a healthy diet and knowing exactly what is in the food that you're buying and eating. But in saying that as well, I think it can be quite self-damaging because I think that depending on how you see your own self-image, you can look more closely at that and take a much more negative like stance from it. So I think they're beneficial to an extent and they should be looked at but differently to how they are.

Bekah Walker [00:18:38] I absolutely 100 percent agree with you there with Kayleigh. It's such a fine balance of being aware and knowing what you're putting into your body, but not becoming obsessive over it as well, and that it's all part of the balanced diet. So I think the traffic light system certainly tries to aid that it's okay to have some bits of red in it, but maybe try not have all of the lights red at the bottom. Certainly, for me, I do look at food labels, but that's because I have an allergy, I have coeliac disease, so I can't eat gluten. So I generally look at the back for the ingredients rather than the front. So I am quite aware of what's going into my body. I guess I have to be because I have an allergy. But then there is that risk that I'll be looking too much into that, and that I could become a little obsessive with it. And that's what you don't want it about having, I keep saying the word balance, but it is about having that informed knowledge to make that decision, what you're putting into your body.

Alex Johnstone [00:19:46] It's Alex again. So I think you mentioned serving size. I think it's worth flagging up that is just what's recommended by the manufacturer. And often we just completely ignore that, don't we? We use our own portion size. If you think about when we're pouring cereal, we don't usually stand with a set of scales with the plate on the scales to measure the exact serving size. So, it's important to remember that some of us will eat less and some of us will eat more than the serving size. A lot of good foods actually don't have traffic lights and a lot of processed foods will have traffic lights. But actually, you know fruit and vegetables don't have traffic lights on. So it's sometimes confusing to know what would count as our portion size towards our five-a-day. So, yes, it can be quite confusing for people who are not aware of what the traffic light system is trying to do. Yes, it can be quite challenging.

Lisa-Marie Schuchardt [00:20:58] I think if you know how to handle the traffic light system, it can be quite helpful. And this is coming from somebody who's home country doesn't have a traffic light system. We are still debating about introducing one. What I also recognised in the United Kingdom that you have this declaration like suitable for vegetarian, suitable for vegan, and we don't have this in Germany, like we have a little symbol for it, but not always. And it's quite hard actually, if you're like me also following like a more plant-based diet, you always read everything on the back. So I really appreciate this stated on products. But also, what Alex mentioned is that the portion sizes are just like recommendations from somewhere. And also, it's hard to have two products that you want to compare if their portion size, maybe it's different. So what I do, I prefer to look at the per 100 gram score on the bag if I really want to compare something for any reasons. But I feel like it's a good attempt to meet with the ample system. Certainly there has to be more education then for people really to work it properly.

Georgia-May Drennan [00:22:14] Yeah, I agree with what Lisa-Marie is saying, like I started following a vegan diet, so being able to read food labels and all the information is really useful. But also, there's so many free apps out there. But I've been using my fitness pal, which is another way to track. I don't track all the time. It just depends on what I'm doing, how I'm feeling. But I think my fitness pal is useful because you can alter it more to your needs. So, you know, if you haven't followed the serving size or if you've had more or less or a little bit of it and having something else, and it's really interesting to see the values, the nutritional values. And I don't track my calories, but if I am tracking, I'll track my macros. So my macronutrients, which is proteins, carbs and fats. And because I have transitioned into vegan lifestyle, I want to make sure that I'm still getting my plant-based proteins. And so it is really useful for me to just be able to see what I've had, what I still can have. Yeah. So I try and use it to my benefit and again, I just think about how you approach it with the right mindset.

Bekah Walker [00:23:28] Yeah. I would have to agree. I do like my fitness pal. I use it kind of on and off as well, kind of depending on what my goals are. But it's very useful I think, to have a broad understanding of what you're putting into your body as well, because then that will correlate to maybe the energy you want to expend. Like, I exercise every day, probably for about half an hour to an hour. So then I would need to take more food into my body than maybe what someone would who is sitting down all day and not exercising. But again, it is striking that balance is well and not becoming obsessive with the with the diet or the exercise. So I've used my fitness pal to get an understanding of what I generally eat, you know, generally eating the same sort of food. So I kind of have a good understanding now of the nutrient value of the food that I do eat. But I don't need to track all the time. I've got that broad understanding from using that app, but I now don't rely on it or use it all the time. And I think, like one of the most important things for me in my gluten free diet is it can be quite expensive and some of the vegan stuff can be expensive as well. So I wonder, and I am sure we would all would like to save some money, so do you guys have any tips that we can share with our listeners on how to eat well for less?

Georgia-May Drennan [00:24:49] I'm currently back at my family home in Glasgow, so I actually haven't been thinking as much about saving, but when I'm living in Aberdeen, I always try to plan my meals in advance before I go shopping so I can plan what I'm having. But then also it means when I write my list, it corresponds with the meals and I'm less likely to buy rubbish that I don't need. And also doing things like batch cooking really helps with costs and there are certain things on a vegan diet that maybe are more expensive. But when I'm not buying meat, which is expensive and, you know, different things like that, I'm thinking that it all evens out. But definitely there are ways to manage it.

Yeah. And I also feel like this sounds really crazy to some people. But if you shop in different places, I've kept my receipts and, you know, you can compare, oh, this is this much here. And it's such a student lifestyle. But, you know, it has worked and it's interesting. So sometimes I'll just know that yoghurt it's more expensive in Tesco or I'll go to Morrisons for that. And, you know, it's all just like, you know, experimenting. And if you need to get your steps up, you know, you can walk. There are loads of shops around. So, yeah, it's just all about trying different things.

Godlin Mathew [00:26:06] I'm staying in Aberdeen because I have to work, so I can't go back home. And so I've been trying to cook more, and because of lockdown I have a small cheeky TikTok addiction. So I have found someone who does student meals and then they give you, like, easy plans, like shopping lists and everything. And it's cheap as well. It tells you how much it adds up to, which is just perfect. And it's not time consuming either. So it's great. And that's what I do.

Alex Johnstone [00:26:34] So I agree with Godlin. Actually, I was going to say food waste is such a hot topic just now, to try and move towards a healthy and sustainable diet, not just on an individual level, but also from a sort of climate change point of view in terms of using our resources in an appropriate way. And we know there's a lot of waste of fruit and vegetables and bread, for example. So I think Georgia May said about having a shopping list, I think that's really important to try and think about planning meals in advance and making sure you've bought the right amount of food to make the recipes that you're going to be planning to eat. So, yeah, these are great tips. I enjoy listening to them. I really enjoy cooking and I also enjoy the tip about batch cooking, for example, soup is a favourite of mine. So, yes, this is great.

Lisa-Marie Schuchardt [00:27:43] Yes, I think nobody really likes to hear it, but I found that here in the United Kingdom, fresh fruit and vegetables are quite inexpensive, actually way cheaper than getting frozen meals or anything. So like cooking at home and using fresh ingredients and maybe cooking for two days to make a larger portion is a really good tip. And also not relying always on branded products. For example, if you have a house brand, it's basically the same. Sometimes it's made in the same factory as the branded product. And what I did when I was living with my boyfriend for my undergraduate degree, we always put at the beginning of the month a certain budget that we wanted to spend on food together. So if one of us went shopping, we used that money and then we had to like see that it's holding us through the whole month, you know, and of course, it doesn't work out the first month or the second, but then you kind of get a grip how much money you need or what is maybe too expensive to buy with every food shop. So, like, set yourself budget and try to consider what you really spend for a week or what you need to spend as a good tip that worked for me.

Kaleigh Innes [00:28:52] Yeah, I think it's really important to try and have a budget because although sometimes you can maybe find yourself spending quite a lot on food or at least I can, it's important to kind of remember as well that you shouldn't really be spending an excessive amount on food. And I think I really agree with what Georgia-May said about cooking in batches, depending on what you're cooking, some things I think you can cook in larger quantities and you can even just keep it for the next day or you could even freeze. And I've noticed that is like a really good way for myself to save money.

Bekah Walker [00:29:25] Yeah, absolutely, I'm a great believer and lover of batch cooking, it's great for stretching your meals out a little bit more like, for example, a pot of chilli can go so far if you just put in some more like kidney beans and stuff, it totally widens

up everything that you've got. But also in terms of what I like about the batch cooking and stuff as well, you know, you can prepare it when you've got time and you've got a healthy, nutritious meal and you can freeze that and then take it out at another point when you maybe don't have so much time, like if you're really stressed with your studying and you've maybe got an exam coming up and you just want to grab something really, really quick to eat, like we've always got pots of chilli, like in the freezer that we can take out. And then within five, 10 minutes, you've got a nutritional meal in front of you. So I think in terms of the saving money, it's great as well. But also it's a great way of getting a nutritional meal when you are a little bit stressed and you've got a little bit less time, it's I guess, maybe not so important just now, when we are all kind of at home and we're not having to be out and about as much. But certainly when I was working in the office, it was always something that, you know, if you're tired when you come home from work or from university, it's great to just put something in the microwave and then you've got this already made nutritional meal as such.

Georgia-May Drennan [00:30:42] I don't know if anyone here has used it, but there's a thing called too good to go, and it's where different companies have waste at the end of the day and they'll reduce the prices or sometimes they can be completely free and you can go there and pick it up. And whether it's fruit or vegetables or lentils or whatever, you know, it's quite a nice way to shop not in a supermarket, you know, and make use of local produce around you.

Bekah Walker [00:31:10] That sounds great, I'll share the link to that with our listeners in the episode description. That sounds really cool. I would just like to thank you guys for coming along to our discussion today. I really enjoyed the discussion. I've got some tips for how I can save some money and make sure I get my nutrition. And I really enjoyed hearing your points of view. And just thank you so much for coming. To any of our listeners, I will share some links to all the topics we discussed today in the episode description. So if you're looking for ways to save some money in a supermarket or if you want to know a lot more about information on food labels, I will share those links so you'll be able to access them. And finally, thank you to you, our listeners, for listening in today. I hope you've enjoyed the episode. Take care and I'll see you next time.

Voiceover [00:32:03] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.