

What the Nutritionist Knows...

Feed your soul

Tips from the experts: this issue we've got nutritionist **HELEN COOKE** of Bristol's Soul Food Company to answer a few routine enquiries about how we can all get healthier in body and mind after the Christmas festivities

Q.

How true is the saying 'we are what we eat', and, if it is, why do most people still ignore it?

Oh, it's entirely true – the food we eat is our body's fuel, and directly affects how we feel and function. We know that certain foods boost our mood, whilst others can sap energy levels – the list is long. It's also good to remember that 'we are what *our food* eats': it's good to avoid the antibiotics in farmed salmon, non-organic chickens, and so on. People are wising up to these

issues, but we've got a way to go. I think we ignore these facts because we want to carry on eating what we want to eat, and it's much more fun to think about how food tastes than to consider its health benefits. The other reason people ignore all this may be because we're all bombarded by ever-changing messages about food's health benefits. It's then quite convenient to justify mindless eating by thinking, 'If the experts can't agree, then why should I worry?'

How much does the average person know about nutrition – and are you surprised by the lack of knowledge when you meet patients?

They know pretty little in my experience. This includes many medics, who sadly have very little training in this area. Quite often people tell me they think they have a healthy diet, and have no idea why they're feeling so unwell – but, actually, they're missing some pretty important elements.

What are the most common diet-related problems, or nutritional deficiencies, that you find in your patients?

I find there's often more of a problem with what people are *not* eating than what they're eating. Lack of good quality protein, such

as organic chicken, fish, nuts and eggs, plus a shortage of vegetables and healthy omega-3 fats (as in oily fish, or good oils like olive, hemp or linseed for dressings), are the most common deficiencies in people's diets. Everyone gets so obsessed by calories in their quest for slimness that they sometimes restrict good fats too, which can lead to all sorts of health problems. Good fats are called 'essential fats' for a reason – they're immensely important to health.

Interestingly, it has been suggested that low-fat diets can *encourage* people to overeat. When we deprive ourselves of critical nutrients, our bodies keep sending signals for us to eat in the hope of finding them. A typical Western diet frequently leaves people both overweight and undernourished.

How easy is it to eat well and still stay in the peak of health? What are your quick tips for this?

Pretty easy – although, of course, this depends on your interpretation of eating well! If eating well means enjoying the sort of high quality, unprocessed, seasonal, locally sourced 'real' food that is celebrated in *Crumbs* – then yes, it's easy to stay in the peak of health. People who eat this way tend to focus on quality rather than quantity (partly because of the expense issue – good food understandably costs more). We tend to slow down when we're eating delicious food so we can savour the taste, which helps with digestion too.

Quick tips: Stick to unprocessed 'real' food. Drink enough water. Try to get out of the habit of snacking, or stick to healthy snacks. Find a type of exercise you enjoy and do it regularly. Try to eat more healthily during the week, so you don't have to worry too much at the weekend. If you're going to indulge, enjoy – don't feel guilty – and just make some healthier choices the next day. All pretty obvious, really!

What types of nutritional problems do you help people with?

I see people with a wide range of health problems – from fatigue or hormone imbalance to men with high cholesterol, which makes my work really interesting. Anxiety, depression and eating disorders



Pomegranates: in season now and heaving with health benefits; also, yum!

seem to be on the rise in my practice. Nutritional deficiencies can exacerbate these issues, so it's very helpful to address these, as they can provide the missing link to a successful outcome.

I work alongside a team of experienced and talented therapists – acupuncturists, psychotherapists and so on – at the Practice Rooms in Bristol and Bath (www.thepracticerooms.co.uk) and the Complete Health Centre in Cirencester. We work in an integrated way, and combine our expertise to support people. Many clients come to me because they think they have food intolerances or allergies, but their problems are frequently caused by poor digestion instead. Digestive problems are incredibly common, and can lead to nutritional deficiencies, allergy issues and pretty serious health

issues if they're not sorted. I often see people for a one-off session who want to simply check they are on the right track with their way of eating, and their supplement regime, to maintain optimal health. Low-carbohydrate diets are very fashionable at the moment, but although this way of eating seems to really suit some, quite a few people run into health problems by doing this. There are relatively