

HEALTH AWARENESS: DIET AND NUTRITION



Diet and Nutrition - How to Fuel up for Optimum Performance and Health

Food provides us with the energy and building blocks that make up our bodies, but it also gives us so much more. Family traditions and many social situations are often centered around food; it provides comfort, pleasure and reward. It's everywhere around us, and there is so much written about food that it's almost impossible to separate out truth from marketing. But for the forestry worker, whose job demands an extremely high level of vigilance and constant risk assessment, the choice and timing of the food and drink consumed can make the difference between a productive day and a potentially life-threatening incident.

There are three main food categories: carbohydrates (carbs), protein and fats. They each provide us with important, life sustaining substances, but because they all act differently, we need different amounts of each at different times.

Carbs mainly provide energy, but they also are used to make important structures in the body. Carb rich foods like fruits and vegetables also supply critical vitamins, minerals, fiber and antioxidants that are essential to good health. All carbs are made up of the basic unit of sugars. When we consume food or drink that taste sweet, the sugars require little digestion and enter the bloodstream quickly. On the other hand, when we consume unprocessed carbs like whole fruits, vegetables and whole grains, they have to be digested to release the sugars just a bit at a time, which is ideal for fueling muscle, immune cells and your brain. Restricting sweets to times when you are engaged in hard physical work can greatly lower the risk of developing diabetes.

In studies with forestry workers, stabilizing blood sugar levels sped up reaction time and accuracy by an average of 15%. For a fully loaded log hauler travelling at 90 km/hr that works out to a life saving 44 feet of stopping distance, should you suddenly have to get on the brakes! Adjusting driver's and equipment operator's diet to lower sugar intake and consume small meals of unprocessed carbs with some protein and a bit of fat significantly lowered blood sugar levels in just two days. Maintaining this diet reduced the need for medications in pre-diabetics.

Proteins are more complex than carbs. They can be used as energy but their main role is as building blocks. Proteins take longer to digest than carbs, so adding some protein to each meal helps slow the release of sugars. Protein needs increase with hard physical activity and as we age. Active workers and those over 60 years of age should try to have six servings of about 20 grams of protein each, spread throughout the day.

Fats are very energy dense; compared to protein or carbs they contain more than twice as many calories for the same weight. For this reason, people who sit for most of the day need to pay attention to how much fat they are eating in order to maintain a healthy weight. The structure of fats makes them very slow to digest, so adding a bit of fat can help you feel full and stabilize blood sugar. But even workers with very high-energy outputs like tree planters or fallers should keep their fat intake to small amounts during the work-day to encourage digestion.

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Facts:

- Food and drink are essential to provide good health, the energy required to do work, and the building blocks necessary for growth and repair of all the body's structures.
- Cultural, social, and emotional influences, time constraints, and taste preferences, combined with marketing and information overload can make it difficult to know what makes up a healthy diet.
- What you choose to eat and drink can influence your ability to stay alert, and react quickly to an unexpected hazard. It can also affect your mood and help protect you from disease.

What To Expect:

- A diet that is mostly made up of unprocessed fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and protein will provide a steady supply of energy to fuel your work.
- Avoiding sweets of any type, unless you are performing hard physical work, will lower your risk of diabetes and improve your ability to stay alert and react quickly to unexpected events.
- Adding a small amount of fat will slow digestion and make you feel full for longer.
- Switching to a diet higher in fiber will protect you from colon cancer but getting used to it takes time. Your bowels will be more active and you will likely generate more gas until your digestive system becomes accustomed to the added fiber.

What You Can Do:

- Replace your morning juice with a serving of fresh fruit and one of your daily snacks with fresh vegetables.
- Try different fresh or roasted vegetables on your sandwich instead of butter, mayo and cheese.
- Avoid sweets unless your job has a very high energy output and you are already working.
- Limit your intake of store bought luncheon meats, and try replacing one meat based meal a week with a vegetarian main course.

What Employers And Supervisors Can Do:

- If you provide food for an employee event choose items that are less processed, and are low in sugar.
- If you have vending machines or sell food on site, try to move away from processed snacks towards healthier choices. Make water available rather than soft drinks or juices.
- Invite a nutritionist to visit with your workers and their families to explain about food choices and reading nutrition labels.

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More Information

Workplace Wellness Topics: including healthy eating, physical activity, mental health, smoke free workplaces, sun safety and cancer screening and early detection.

healthywork.ca/

Canada's Healthy Eating Guide:

food-guide.canada.ca/en/

Working on Wellness BC Coalition for Healthy Living:

bchealthyliving.ca/what-we-do/working-on-wellness/healthy-eating/

Faller Food Choice Poster:

bcforestsafesafe.org/files/ps_FallerFoodChart.pdf

Healthy Eating Tips from Heart and Stroke Foundation:

heartandstroke.ca/get-healthy/healthy-eating