"Clean Eating": When "Healthy" Eating Becomes Unhealthy

"Clean Eating"

It is difficult to know what constitutes "healthy" eating nowadays. This is not surprising given that we seem to be bombarded with messages about what our eating "should" look like in newspapers, television programmes, online articles and social media.

Recently, a lot of material has begun to surface suggesting that healthy eating involves eating foods that are "clean". **"Clean eating"** can be described as eating only select foods from each of the major food groups (e.g., carbohydrates, proteins etc.) and eliminating foods that are high in sugar, trans-fats, preservatives and/or additives. It also involves choosing foods based on how they are processed or manufactured.

At face value, "clean" eating may *appear* to reflect traditional healthy eating guidelines, which advocate for flexible and nutritious eating habits (see the Australian National Eating Guidelines). However, it its common for those attempting to eat "cleanly" to quickly progress from *limiting* their intake of certain food types (e.g., foods high in sugar) to *avoiding* these foods altogether. Restricting our food intake in this way can pose serious risks to both our physical and mental wellbeing.

Extreme "Clean" Eating: What are the risks?

In terms of our physical health, eating *too* "cleanly" may cause us to miss out on key nutrients that are essential to our health, even if we are consuming the required amount of energy (calories) per day. This can lead to the development of a form of disordered eating whereby individuals become obsessed in their attempts to eat "righteously", "cleanly" and/or "perfectly". The term **Orthorexia** (although it is not a formal diagnosis), is often used to describe this pattern of eating which is equally apparent in men and women. Worryingly, individuals can suffer from potentially severe medical consequences as a result, including hormonal disturbances and heart problems – please refer to our handouts titled *Eating Disorders: What are the risks?* and *Starvation Syndrome* for more detailed information.

Extreme "clean" eating can have a considerable impact on mental wellbeing, even if physical health is unaffected. Research suggests that the more we attempt to control and limit our intake, the more we feel a sense of deprivation, which in turn leads us to become *very preoccupied* with our eating behaviours. This can strongly impact on our concentration at work or school, or even on our hobbies and interests.

Also, if we only allow ourselves to eat a *very select* group of foods, it is likely that our social life will be affected. Labelling eating as "clean" implies that alternative ways of eating are "unclean" or even "dirty". Not only is this assumption incorrect but it also carries with it a sense of righteousness and moral superiority to others who do not eat in this way. As a result, this form of restrictive eating makes it difficult to share meals with family or friends, and we may become increasingly isolated.

Extreme clean eating can also impact on our mood, such as feeling irritable or "down" while trying to adhere to a strict eating pattern. Others may feel guilty or anxious when their eating rules are broken (and they almost inevitably will be, as it takes a superhuman effort to be able to eat "perfectly" all the time). Remember, healthy eating involves being able to enjoy a restaurant meal, a glass of alcohol and processed food in moderation.

8 Signs Your Eating is Too Inflexible

If you're starting to wonder whether you are becoming too obsessed with eating "cleanly", then ask yourself the following questions:

1. Have I cut out specific foods or entire food groups?
2. Do I find myself feeling guilty after eating "bad" foods, or a sense of pride/achievement after eating good or "clean" foods?
3. Is it very difficult (or impossible) for me to eat a meal prepared by someone else?
4. Am I starting to limit socialising with others so that I am able to stick to my eating routine?
5. Do I judge other people's eating habits or encourage them to eat in a similar way to me?
6. Do I spend a large amount of time planning my meals in advance?
7. Do I often spend time researching wellness blogs that stipulate nutritional components of foods, and the need to follow specific ways of eating?
8. Am finding it difficult to concentrate, or perform at work/ university because I can't stop thinking about food, planning my meals, or perfecting how I am eating?

If you answered 'yes' to some of these questions, then you may be putting your mental and physical wellbeing at risk by attempting eat in a rigid and restrictive manner.

Overcoming Extreme "Clean" Eating

The following represent some ways that you can start to overcome problematic clean eating:

- Follow a balanced, flexible eating plan that is based on dietary recommendations. This includes eating foods from *all* the food groups (e.g. protein, fats, carbohydrates, fruits, vegetables and dairy) and allowing yourself (without feeling guilty!) to eat foods such as chocolate and cake in moderation.
- Limit the amount of time you spend researching what you "should" eat and critically evaluate the information you read (see our *Evaluating Dietary Advice* handout).
- Use the Australian nutritional standards as an objective and unbiased guide to eating healthily.
- Access help from a qualified professional (e.g., a dietitian, your GP, a psychologist).
- For more information on what normal eating looks like, see our handout *Normal Eating*.

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