

Nutrition and Naturopathic Medicine

When one hears about nutrition, it is usually in reference to the Canada Food Guide or the recommendations for healthy eating from the Canadian Diabetes Association. These are very good resources to get one started on the right path to healthier eating habits. From a Naturopathic Medical perspective the Naturopathic Doctor will focus on metabolism and therapeutic micronutrient dosages (also known as orthomolecular medicine). What this means is that your Naturopathic Doctor goes far beyond the generalities of digestive function, the four food groups, and the glycemic index. Your ND should assess the cellular metabolism of your body and how these processes are working to produce functional and healthy systems within your body. Nutritional research has shifted in the last 50 years from the discovery of vitamins and minerals and their deficiency associated diseases to what role they play in the therapy and prevention of such disease states.

Micronutrients, which refer to the trace minerals, vitamins, amino acids and essential fatty acids, are normally present in a microgram (mcg) or milligram (mg) dose. Optimal dosages of these micronutrients can treat many diseases and prevent many more from developing, without relying on more costly and potentially dangerous drugs and surgery. Led by Dr. Linus Pauling in the 1960's (winner of the Nobel Prize twice), this new paradigm caused the realization that many micronutrients have a profound effect beyond simple prevention of deficiency related diseases. He proved that many chronic diseases occur when micronutrient deficiencies or imbalances cripple a person's biochemical processes and metabolism. The progress in research over time has reduced the scientific skepticism and orthomolecular medicine has proved itself to be a powerful new therapeutic approach.

A person needs about 45 micronutrients to support normal and healthy functioning of his/her body. These must be supplied by the dietary intake, as the body cannot make them. They are necessary because these micronutrients in turn have roles as chemical messengers, enzymes and the molecules needed for building cells and so forth. Every cell in the human body is made up of micronutrients, which have a high turnover rate and must be quickly replaced. Most micronutrients are not stored in the body and regular daily intake through a good diet is necessary to maintain tissue levels. A deficient or low supply of these micronutrients will slow the process or tissue repair and can increase vulnerability to disease.

It is important to remember that the level of micronutrient intake adequate for day to day survival is often not enough to promote life-long, optimal health. For example, in spite of adequate levels in the blood or other tissues, localized deficiencies of folate in the cervix of women taking oral contraceptives and in the colon in ulcerative colitis may increase the risk of dysplasia in these tissues. However, like all substances, micronutrients can be toxic if taken in high dosages over the long term. It is always recommended that you speak to your Naturopathic Doctor when considering the dosage of micronutrients for your health.

Source: Zimmermann, M. Burgerstein's Handbook of Nutrition: Micronutrients in the therapy and prevention of disease. 2001 Georg Verlag Thieme: Stuttgart, Germany