

#HEALTH & FITNESS

Eating right without starving: A practical nutrition plan for women



Staying in shape while maintaining proper nutrition has almost always been an uphill battle for Bangladeshi women. A 2023 study reveals that female students in universities were more likely to develop eating disorders in comparison to male students. It further stated that women have higher body dissatisfaction and place greater importance on physical appearance, which may cause them to exhibit unfavourable eating behaviours.

The media further perpetuates these by endorsing thin-ness as the benchmark for beauty and fitness. To add insult to injury, there are family members and peers passing snide remarks about their bodies. The result? Skipping meals and eating less than the required amount have become the norm for many young girls and women, ultimately forcing them to go into starvation mode.

Nayma Hasan, Nutrition and Lifestyle Coach, does a deep dive on the social, emotional, and cultural factors that hinder women from meeting their nutritional and fitness goals. She is a Certified Nutrition Coach backed by Precision Nutrition on Exercise Nutrition. In addition, she's a Personal Trainer, vetted by the National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM) and a Level-1 Online Trainer, certified by Personal Trainer Development Center.

Hasan shares that energy-dense foods like processed carbohydrates and industrialised fats cause us to store more fat in our bodies instead of gaining muscle. However, if we eat protein and fibre-rich foods, and consume three smaller meals throughout the day we will not gain this weight. However, the grim reality is that our relationship with food is mostly



emotional than logical.

The fault in our portions

Having gone through the same motions in her formative years, Hasan reminds us that each body is unique, and no one should force themselves into one specific type as their health and well-being are tied to genetics, age as well as environment. According to the nutrition coach, our social and cultural conditioning often acts as the blueprint for our staple diets.

"Habit and comfort are two reasons why people have a hard time controlling their portions. Hence, they don't think about the repercussions in the long run. Children who are fed large portions of rice from a young age tend to continue this practice in their later lives. Which is why no one has the awareness to question it, let alone unlearn it," she observes.

Nayma Hasan adds that the cultural practice of 'eating fast' as opposed to mindfully also impacts children well into their adulthood. This behaviour causes the bodily functions to fight stress, which signals the body to store the fat as a coping mechanism for survival.

"When we eat mindfully from an early age, it promotes a relaxed digestion, reduces storage of fat and suppresses spontaneous cravings. This holds more benefits for children's bodies as they get older," states Nayma Hasan.

Carb conundrum: To eat or not to eat?

Nayma informs us that carbohydrates, proteins, and fats are essential macronutrients for all bodies. Micronutrients are the minerals and vitamins that we get from certain fruits and vegetables. Therefore, we need to strike the right balance.

Carbs fuel our bodies and give us energy,

and also aid in growing muscles. If our body lacks the energy to develop muscles, it will not function properly. We primarily focus on protein for muscle development, but this also needs to be backed by carbohydrates.

"Keeping body fat percentage at an all-time low is recommended only for those who are participating in bodybuilding competitions. But for ordinary people, it is not possible to function with just six per cent body fat. Hence, we need to consume a specific amount and not completely cut it out as a measure for weight loss," she suggests.

Is this realistic?

Discipline must be tailored according to one's health and lifestyle, says Nayma.

"I will never be super skinny, despite my skills and knowledge of fitness and nutrition, since I have a specific body type. We must remember that there's a stark difference between our lives and influencers, which is why we cannot replicate their fitness goals," she emphasises.

For example, people who have PCOS struggle to lose weight as their body's messaging system is disrupted. Emotions are at an all-time high, which is why their drive to lose weight is often thwarted.

In such cases, Nayma recommends giving grace to our bodies through a befitting action plan aligned with health issues and weaknesses. Only then will we get an understanding of our strengths and limitations.

Clean eating: Easy, affordable and guilt-free

Contrary to popular belief, a calorie-deficient diet can be maintained while eating rice, provided it's the right amount. Nayma Hasan recommends women to split their daily nutrition into two to three smaller meals, or four to five if needed, while keeping in mind that these may

change according to their lifestyles.

For women working 8-10 hours, the strategies need to be simple — to have food that's available at home and not fall for the popularly marketed 'fit foods' such as oats and quinoa. Simultaneously, they need to consciously keep processed food at bay.

"Wherever we go, we must find the foods which are naturally produced. While it's impossible to control portions at restaurants, we can still prioritise protein. So, instead of cutting out carbs, we must amp up our protein intake to encourage muscle development and overall bodily function on a cellular level. Secondly, if we are adding vegetables and salads to our diet, we can choose places that provide items such as grilled chicken. For home-cooked meals, our carb intake should be one-fourth of the portions, in comparison to protein. University-going women can opt for budget-friendly foods at the cafeteria that include chicken, eggs or try packing lunch from home," Nayma Hasan says.

For homemakers who are unable to exercise regularly, she suggests maintaining portions of home-cooked meals and reducing the availability of processed foods at home, when shopping for groceries.

"If meal prep sounds physically taxing, they can prepare some ingredients to avoid preparing food from scratch. At the same time, they need to eat foods at specific times of the day to practice mindful eating and try to curb their cravings after having the last meal of the day," she explains.

Before signing off, Nayma Hasan reminds us that alongside nutrition, every individual should prioritise drinking water. She says, "Whether you eat healthy or junk, make sure you drink enough water, as it helps suppress hunger and cravings."

By Rubab Nayeem Khan
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