



Influencing Optimum Health for Nurses



THERESA CRISCITELLI, EdD, RN, CNOR

Nurses represent the largest profession in health care, with more than 2.8 million practicing nurses in the United States.^{1,2} Nurses spend much of their practice promoting the health of their patients and their patients' families, but many do not take adequate care of themselves and often make unhealthy lifestyle choices. For example, approximately 55% to 65% of nurses are overweight or obese, a condition that can lead to fatigue, occupational injury, physical limitations, and depression.³ Also, the smoking rate of nurses is three times greater than that of physicians.⁴ These lifestyle choices may be the result of stressful work environments. By improving their health, nurses can improve their lives and provide better care for their patients. A focus on daily nutrition can improve overall health by offering a practical and informative approach adaptable to nurses' work environments.

Although nurses provide patients with nutritional education in the hospital setting, Ilmonen et al⁵ found that nursing schools provide limited nutritional education for nurses; 60% of the

nurses they surveyed reported inadequate knowledge of nutrition. Nursing schools design their curricula to integrate an array of relevant content properly sequenced to achieve broad goals and objectives. As a result, the quantity and quality of nutritional education may be limited and focused on patient care rather than self care.

Nutrition plays a major role in influencing personal health and ideal weight. It helps to reduce the effects of stress and inflammation on the body and maintain proper sleep patterns.⁶ Meyer⁷ states that nurses routinely miss meals to care for patients. Long surgical procedures in which relief for personnel is not available are common in the OR, and this situation results in missed or eliminated breaks. Extended time without food or liquids can result in lower blood glucose levels, diminished hydration, irritability, and fatigue.⁸ Keeping oneself in optimum condition can help reduce these effects and ultimately prevent poor food choices when food is available. This outcome requires knowledge, planning, and preparation.

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NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE

Understanding what to eat and what not to eat can become confusing when watching the media and reading self-help books. It is imperative to keep it simple and eat *clean*. *Eating clean* means to minimize the use of additives, refinement, and processing as much as possible in what is consumed. In other words, whole, unmodified food is best. Many healthy and nutritious food options take very little preparation time and can help prevent skipping meals.

Blood Glucose Levels

The brain requires glucose to function, and the availability of glucose is compromised within four to six hours of a missed meal.⁸ When a person skips a meal, his or her body goes into a fasting mode, and his or her blood glucose level can plummet. This change leads to decreased concentration, increased fatigue, and increased irritability.⁸ Therefore, it is important to keep the blood glucose level stable throughout the workday.

The human body performs best when blood sugar levels are fairly constant. Understanding the foods that affect blood glucose levels is essential. The glycemic index ranks carbohydrates based on the glycemic response they cause when ingested. These ratings range from 0 to 100, with higher values given to foods that cause the quickest rise in blood sugar (eg, pure glucose has a glycemic index of 100). Foods that contain fat and fiber tend to have a lower glycemic index (Table 1).⁸ Eating foods that have a low (ie, less than 55) or medium (ie, between 56 and 69) glycemic index can help keep blood glucose levels relatively steady.

Avoiding foods with a high glycemic index can help prevent the urge to consume high-calorie foods that have little nutritional value but are easily accessible. Raising the glycemic index quickly as a result of consuming foods with high concentrations of simple sugars (eg, candy, cookies, soft drinks) leads to a sudden blood sugar spike and subsequent drop that can cause symptoms of sleepiness. Persistently high blood glucose levels over time can result in insulin resistance (ie, metabolic syndrome), in which the body fails to respond normally to the insulin the pancreas produces and becomes increasingly unable to regulate glucose levels.⁹ This resistance eventually results in type 2 diabetes, which contributes to a risk of heart disease and obesity.⁹ In addition to glucose regulation, hydration plays a major role in a nurse's health.

Hydration

Staying hydrated throughout the day is important for heart health and helps muscles work more efficiently. Dehydration

Table 1. Glycemic Index of Specific Foods¹

Low Glycemic Index Foods	Medium Glycemic Index Foods
100% stone-ground whole wheat or pumpernickel bread	Rye and pita bread
Oatmeal (rolled or steel-cut), oat bran, muesli	Quick oats
Quinoa, farrow, barley, bulgur	Brown, wild, or basmati rice; couscous
Sweet potatoes, leafy greens, asparagus	White potatoes, corn, beets
Legumes, lentils	Popcorn
Apples, pears	Mangoes, apricots
Reference 1. Glycemic index and diabetes. American Diabetes Association. http://www.diabetes.org/food-and-fitness/food/what-can-i-eat/understanding-carbohydrates/glycemic-index-and-diabetes.html . Updated May 14, 2014. Accessed November 21, 2016.	

affects health, well-being, and performance.¹⁰ There is no prescriptive amount of fluid that should be ingested;¹¹ however, the color of a person's urine is an indicator of hydration status. Pale yellow or colorless urine indicates that a person is well hydrated, and dark yellow urine is a sign that more fluid intake is required. The beverage of choice for adequate hydration is water because up to 60% of the human body is composed of water, it is readily available, and it sufficiently quenches thirst.¹² Also, foods such as fruits and vegetables with high water content (eg, watermelon, tomatoes, lettuce) can add to daily hydration. Caution should be taken when consuming caffeinated beverages, because in large doses (ie, ≥ 500 mg), caffeine elicits a diuretic effect.¹¹ The Institute of Medicine studied the consumption of caffeine and concluded that caffeinated beverages also can contribute to daily water needs if consumed in moderation, meaning approximately 180 mg/day, but there is no clear evidence indicating that cumulative water deficits are related to habitual consumption of caffeine.¹²

Bringing a water bottle to work and keeping it in a convenient location away from patient care areas can help nurses monitor their fluid intake. Adding fresh fruit (eg, strawberries, oranges), vegetables (eg, cucumbers), or herbs (eg, basil) to drinking water also can help increase its nutritional value by adding antioxidants.

Antioxidants

Antioxidants can be found in foods and nutritional supplements. Antioxidants interact with and neutralize free radicals,

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