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ith a seemingly ever-increasing work and debt load, more and more students are spending long hours of relative inactivity writing term papers or just paying the bills. This translates into little time to spare for cooking real meals, leaving many students to turn to pizza and burgers instead and making the Freshman 15 look like an understatement.

The problem is that unhealthy eating affects more than just the waistline—and in most cases, a student's already thin wallet is the first casualty. The cost of convenience—that is, eating out or cooking frozen, prepared food—adds up over time, and is far less nutritious than cooking your own meals at home.

No matter what's being crammed down your gullet between classes, food also affects your body in ways you might not expect—most notably your concentration. Nothing is more important in preparing for a final or in writing a major essay than the ability to concentrate, yet students often become so focused on their work that they forget to eat.

And according to U of A nutritionist Dana Wilkinson, that's a big mistake.

"Your brain needs glucose as a fuel, so if you're on a really low-carbohydrate diet that's too low on

processed enter the bloodstream slowly over time and prevent a peak in blood sugar levels.

To really make a difference in overall health, Wilkinson says, healthy eating needs to be incorporated into everyday living—and the first step is understanding the difference between calories and nutrients.

"Even if you're not eating too many calories in a day, if the foods that you're eating are McDonalds burgers and fries, that's not a healthy diet," she says. "So, there are calories, but there are also nutrients."

Shaking things up

Fulfilling those nutritional requirements requires more than just variety. According to Wilkinson, a good dietary profile to follow is the Canada Food Guide. Although most people remember the basic four food groups that they learned as kids, they tend to forget the huge differences in daily requirements for each group. While a university-aged male needs 8–10 servings of vegetables and fruits and eight grain servings each day to meet his nutritional needs, he only needs two servings of dairy and three servings of meat—meaning a little more of mom's cooking and a little less Marco's.

Another important consideration is that of moderation. The average female needs about

gaining weight, alcohol should be mixed with water or a low-calorie mix, like diet pop.

An extra threat to the dress-size during a night on the town is bar food. According to Wilkinson, most restaurant food is chock full of beltline-expanding goodness.

"In general, any restaurant eating, you're going to come away having eaten a ton of fat and calories, and you probably didn't even know it," she notes.

But even when eating out, your choice of establishment is still a big factor. Very few restaurants have menus that are completely terrible for your health. For instance, if you're really watching the calories, salads are always an option—if you're aware of what's in them and what goes on top of them.

"If you look at the salads that McDonalds offers, a lot of them have as much fat as a Big Mac," Wilkinson points out. "It can be difficult to know because salad dressing is a huge culprit. It's full of fat and calories."

Of course, the choices can seem fairly limited if, like residents at the U of A, the menu is restricted to what's available on campus. A quick walk through SUB or HUB turns up mostly fast food joints, and residence food has a reputation of not being much better.

However, according to Kaila Hauck, food ombudsman for Lister Hall, this reputation may not be wholly deserved.

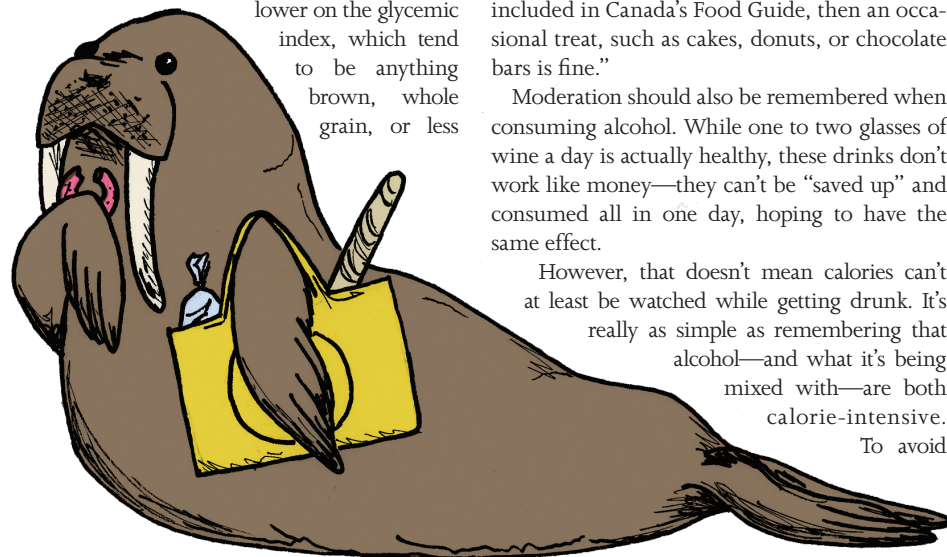
"Overall, all foods can fit into a healthy diet; moderation and balance is the key. That is our approach: if the majority of your calories come from nutritious foods included in Canada's Food Guide, then an occasional treat, such as cakes, donuts, or chocolate bars is fine."

DANA WILKINSON
U of A nutritionist

carbohydrates, you won't be able to concentrate because your brain needs that glucose, and it's struggling to get it."

Of course, filling up on just any food isn't necessarily the solution either. While eating too little prevents concentration, eating too much of the wrong thing will induce restlessness. That's because foods with a very high glycemic index are absorbed very quickly into the bloodstream, shooting up blood sugar levels and essentially giving a "sugar high." Foods

lower on the glycemic index, which tend to be anything brown, whole grain, or less



1800–2200 calories daily, while the average male needs anywhere from 2000–2500 calories daily, depending on factors such as weight and activity level. Within those limits, specific nutrient requirements still need to be met.

But according to Wilkinson, this doesn't mean there isn't room for the occasional treat.

"Overall, all foods can fit into a healthy diet; moderation and balance is the key," she explains. "That is our approach: if the majority of your calories come from nutritious foods included in Canada's Food Guide, then an occasional treat, such as cakes, donuts, or chocolate bars is fine."

Moderation should also be remembered when consuming alcohol. While one to two glasses of wine a day is actually healthy, these drinks don't work like money—they can't be "saved up" and consumed all in one day, hoping to have the same effect.

However, that doesn't mean calories can't at least be watched while getting drunk. It's really as simple as remembering that alcohol—and what it's being mixed with—are both calorie-intensive. To avoid

"There's generally good variety. The menu changes every four weeks," she explains. "It might be a bit harder if you're a picky eater, though."

Unfortunately, eating healthy is easier said than done; after all, what makes food taste good, for the most part, is fat and sugar—the very same things that result in the dreaded man-boobs and muffin-tops. But the decision to indulge shouldn't cause panic because a healthy lifestyle also includes regular exercise—which, believe it or not, will go a long way towards burning off that beer belly.

Keep fit, and have fun

Although most people generally only see the physical benefits of exercise and fitness, it's also beneficial to general mental health, a factor particularly important to postsecondary students dealing with the onslaught of various assignments and exams and the inevitable increase in stress levels brought on by frantic cramming. However, when a student is slumped over a textbook, trying to avoid dozing off and studying through the night, just about the last thing on his or her mind is taking an exercise break.

According to Dr Wendy Rodgers, a professor and exercise psychologist in the Physical

Have any workout tips for the student on the go? Post your fat-busting favorites in this week's online features section at www.thegatewayonline.ca