

In A Bite with Charlotte Mei

5 Most Overheard Nutrition Myths

Full Transcript

Charlotte 00:04

We've reached episode five, y'all!! What..! Or to be really specific in counting the Tidbits episode we've reached episode nine! I'll be wrapping up this season with ten episodes in total. So after next week's Tidbits, I will be taking a little break before planning what comes next. It's been such a journey launching In A Bite, both a podcast and a newsletter... just eight weeks ago, can you imagine that? Taking on this podcast project has beefed up my already packed schedule, so my weeks have been really intense. Yet at the same time, I've really enjoyed being closer to science, which is something I've missed. And, you know, there have been so many new learnings just through the process of launching a podcast. So as mentioned, I'll be taking a break to breathe, systemise and come back with more interesting content for you.

And while I'm on a seasonal break, I will still be sending out my newsletters. So if you haven't subscribed yet, head over to my website, thecharlottemei.com to do so. I'll be working across several cities in the next couple of weeks, so in addition to nutrition updates and fun food facts, I'll be sharing a behind the scenes look into my travels as well.

Now, in this last main episode of the season, I want to address myths and false statements that I hear very often as a nutritionist. These are topics that don't exactly need an entire episode to explain so I decided to group them together into one. There were so many topics I wanted to include, but I decided to stick to 5 lest this becomes a 30 minute long episode. And to be fair, I could very well hit that mark if I wanted to. But let's just keep it concise here.

So let's get to it. The 5 Most Overheard Nutrition Myths.

The first: Eating fruits after a meal is not good for digestion.

How many times have you been told to eat fruits before a meal because it will ferment and your tummy if you have it afterwards?

Now I've been told this countless times growing up and I just couldn't piece together the puzzle. If you're like me and enjoy having a refreshing fruit after a meal, that was just devastating to hear. And I can now assure you that your food will digest just fine if you're having a fruit after a meal.

Our stomach doesn't operate on an eat first digest first basis. If we look at the basics of digestion, the breakdown of your food starts in our mouths. Our teeth breaks down food into smaller pieces. Then the enzyme called 'amylase', which is present in our saliva, starts

the breakdown of simple sugars. Once this food reaches your stomach, it gets mixed about with other digestive enzymes that digest other components of the food you've eaten. And at this point, the apple that you eat right after your dinner is going to be indistinguishable from the contents of your main meal.

That said, if you had the apple an hour after your dinner, your stomach would have already started to digest whatever you've eaten for your main meal, right? And this apple, it would now be added to the stomach's digestion efforts but it certainly wouldn't be sitting on top of your dinner and getting fermented by any means

And after passing through the stomach, this partially digested food enters the small intestine where most nutrients will get absorbed. And again, the small intestine doesn't distinguish between when a food was eaten. So remember, when it comes to digestion, everything you eat will eventually become one large pulpy mixture and it does not sit in your stomach in separate layers.

So I repeat, what you eat first has nothing to do with how your food gets digested.

This next one I tend to hear in situations where, say, I'm at someone's house for dinner, a dinner that they've prepared or you know, someone has baked something for me and as they pass it to me or as they serve food to me, they go, "Hey, Charlotte, by the way, I only use pink Himalayan salt in my kitchen, okay. So none of that, you know, nasty common table salt business in this. Pink Himalayan salt is better for health so you can have more of it."

Now, it could be pink salt, sea salt, rock salt, table salt, kosher salt. From a nutritional standpoint, salt is salt.

There is this perception that certain types of salt are so-called better for you as long as it is not table salt. Most of the time, what makes them healthier is the fact that they contain certain minerals that table salt doesn't have. So let's get to know a little bit more about this pink Himalayan salt.

It's mined from the Khewra salt mines in Pakistan. And its natural pink hue comes from the trace minerals that it contains. And compare it to table salt, pink salt contains minerals like potassium, magnesium, iron and calcium. But in really, really small amounts. And, you know, if we really wanted to get a substantial portion of these minerals from salt, we'd have to consume a lot of it.

Because take potassium, for example. Out of all the salt, it's found to be the highest in pink salt. And yet it only makes up 0.3% of the salt's mineral content.

So as you can see, the amount of trace minerals are very, very low and they won't have significant impact on your daily nutrition intake. There are many other foods out there that we consume in larger quantities that contain these minerals.

If anything, you'd want to pay more attention to the sodium content, because that's the main nutrient found in salt. And again, having said that, the sodium content from one salt to the other doesn't differ very much.

Table salt sits at about 39% sodium, while pink salt sits at about 37%. So if I were to give general advice about salt from a nutrition perspective, I'd say, don't worry so much about which type of salt you're using but focus instead on the amount of salt or sodium that you're consuming throughout the day. Because you could be using the best and priciest salt out there, but if you're an adult consuming more than five grams of salt a day, which is slightly under a teaspoon, you could be putting yourself at cardiovascular health risk.

So when it comes to salt, expensive or exotic certainly doesn't mean better.

And here's a useful one for you. If you cook often and are wondering which salt is better for different contexts in the kitchen. According to wise words I once read, the best salt to cook with is the one that you use most often. And this is because when it comes to cooking, what we want to strive for is consistency.

The amount of salt that you yield from a pinch of different salt types will vary. And so if you're constantly changing up your salt types, your food may not end up tasting the way you intended. So focusing on four common salts, I'm going to go into the main differences between table salt, sea salt, pink salt and kosher salt.

Now, table salt is the most common one we see around. They are mined from salt deposits and most commonly contain an anti clumping agent. And this is why you can very easily shake it out of the salt shaker. The crystals are very fine, granular and uniform in shape

And if you're listening from the U.S., it's likely that the table salt you find at the grocery store will be labelled as 'iodised salt'. This is because there was a widespread iodine deficiency in the early 20th century. And to combat this, table salt, which is the most commonly used seasoning, was fortified with iodine. And if you're wondering, "why is this mineral so important in our diet?", it's because it plays a key role in the production of thyroid hormones. And this influences our growth, development and metabolic functions.

Thing is, iodised salt doesn't tend to be very popular among chefs and this is for no reason other than it tends to have a slight bitter or metallic aftertaste. So iodised or not, does table salt have a place in your kitchen? Absolutely. And I personally use it to season pasta water or for baking.

The second is sea salt, which is essentially made by evaporating seawater. And you get various types of sea salt. From fine granules, which you can use for seasoning, to flaky crystals, which are great for finishing a dish, to coarser ones, which are better for brining. And like pink salt, they contain minerals too. But again, at trace amounts which are negligible considering how much salt we consume, which is hopefully not a lot.

And let's talk a little bit about price. A lot of people think that because it costs more, it's better for health. But most such salts are pricey simply because they're more labour-intensive to produce. And so that's what you're paying for, along with a unique texture and stronger flavour that you get from them.

I love to use sea salt, especially to crush over a final dish before serving or over some chocolate chip cookies before baking them. It adds a slight texture, amazing flavour. And come on, it looks pretty, too.

And if I'm feeling fancy I'll use fleur de sel, which are really delicate, high moisture crystals that have a rather soft texture. And they're pretty unique; they're hand-collected using special sieves, typically in a part of France called Guérande and the only form under certain weather conditions. So that explains its price tag as well.

Thirdly, we have kosher salt. Now, I think it's not that common here in Asia, but we definitely hear more of it in Europe and America. Most chefs love to cook with kosher salt because a granule size is much, much larger, and hence it's easier to get a consistent pinch of it.

I've not compared prices, but apparently kosher salt is meant to be more affordable as well. And by the way, it's termed kosher simply because the large crystal size makes it suitable for drying out moisture from meat and is hence used in the koshering process of salting meat in order to remove any residual blood.

And then we come back to the pink Himalayan salt. Similarly to sea salt, it's great to use as a finishing salt because let's be frank, it's pretty. But by no means are you making your dish any healthier by seasoning it with pink salt over table salt or sea salt or any other types of salts.

In summary, you certainly don't need one of each salt in your pantry. I would say to have maybe two types of salt. One that you cook with, so something that's fine and dissolves quickly into your food and it's inexpensive, something like table salt or fine sea salt. Then you also want to have something coarser that you use at texture and flavour as a finishing touch. So there you can have your pink salt if you like. I personally like to use flaky sea salt, etc., etc..

So this section on salt ended up being way longer than I had intended, but I guess I went down a salty rabbit hole with this commonly heard idea about, you know, one salt being

better than the other. And from a health perspective, really, it's all about the amount you use, not the type of salt that you use.

Okay, next statement. This is another common one that: washing one's fruit and vegetables with water is insufficient in ensuring clean produce and a dedicated fruit and vegetable wash is needed.

Okay. So two questions. First, is it important to wash your fruits and vegetables before consuming them? Yes. Is it necessary to buy a special wash for it? No. Plain water is more than enough to do the job of washing off contaminants and dirt.

So a study was conducted at the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at the University of Maine and they tested the level of residual pesticides in microbes and fruit when washing produce with distilled water, with three different types of fruit and vegetable wash products, and not washing at all. Turns out, A. you definitely need to wash your fruit and veg. And B. some of these washes actually left behind a residue of their own, thereby affecting the flavour of the produce.

So according to the research findings, washing with good ol' H₂O is good enough.

Now, of course, most of us don't have distilled water lying around at home, but clean cold tap water works just as fine. We may not feel it, but running water has an abrasive effect that it's enough to remove dirt, harmful microbes and surface pesticides. So you certainly don't need any fancy washes to ensure that your produce is safe for consumption.

If you want to be more thorough, you can use a brush or scrub with fruits or vegetables with thicker skins. And if you wash your produce with more grooves like broccoli or cauliflower, you may want to soak them in water for about one to 2 minutes.

So there you go, as long as the water in your country is potable, you can use that to wash your fruits and vegetables.

The next statement goes like this: I need to reset my system so I'm going to go on a juice detox

Okay, folks, no single food or lemon water or juice detox is going to replace the sophisticated detoxification process that already takes place in your body through your liver and kidneys.

Our bodies are constantly going through a detoxification process, turning fat soluble compounds into water soluble ones that get excreted by the body through our urine, our sweat, and our stool, and depending on the foods that we include in our diet, they will support our organs to do their normal job. You don't need no fancy juice diets for this.

Instead of going on a food detox, you can think about how else you can improve your daily life. Are you getting enough sleep? Or are you consuming enough fresh and whole foods on a daily basis? How are you managing stress and do you have enough *play* in your life? Or could your daily screen time be reduced? How about detoxing your social media maybe? And who are the people that you surround yourself with the most? These are all different ways that you can give yourself a detox without having to starve yourself and juices or squeeze lemon juice into water every morning. If you like it, that's completely fine, but you definitely don't need to do that just to reset your system. And you know what? Maybe that juice detox is causing you increased stress. So food for thought there.

And lastly: eating several small meals throughout the day will boost my metabolism and help me lose weight.

The thing is, there is no right way of spacing out your meals throughout the day. When digestion occurs, your metabolism is raised slightly because your body is expending energy as it digests, absorbs and stores the nutrients in the food that you've just eaten. This is called the thermic effect. And I'm guessing this is why there is this belief that eating multiple small meals throughout the day has a metabolism boosting effect. However, the extent of this thermic effect is dependent on the size of your meal and not how often you eat. So the more you eat, the larger the thermic effect.

Science has shown that there is no right way to space out your meals. It depends on the individual, and what works best for each person will look different across the board. So, for example, my brother doesn't snack at all. He has three hefty meals a day and works perfectly on that. For me, I can't quite eat very much in one sitting, so I prefer to have two main meals that get me to about 70 to 80% fullness. And then I graze in between.

So the number of meals eaten throughout the day doesn't matter as much if we're looking at fat loss. And as science has shown, there are no significant metabolism boosting effects of eating smaller meals throughout the day. What matters most is that we're meeting our daily calorie and nutrient requirements. So do what works for you.

And there you have it, 5 commonly overheard nutrition myths that I've been itching to debunk. I hope you've learned a thing or two and now feel more confident about eating a fruit after dinner if you want it to, or forgoing those expensive juice diet subscriptions and the fancy salt section of the supermarket.

As mentioned, this episode will follow, as usual with a tidbits episode, so send in your questions or thoughts about anything I've mentioned, and I'll answer it in the next and final episode of the season

As I plan for what's coming up, I would love to get your thoughts on how to make this the most valuable podcast you listen to. So you can drop me a message at hello@thecharlottemei.com or on Instagram @thecharlottemei.

And if you could do me a small little favour, share this episode with one friend that you think will find this interesting.

For the full transcript of this episode, head over to my website thecharlottemei.com/podcast.