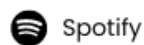




HEALTHIER YOU

A Vanderbilt Health & Wellness Podcast

Listen on Your Favorite App



Spotify



Apple Podcast



iHeart Radio

[Season 1, Episode 5: Nutrition and Aging](#)

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

RB: Welcome! Joining me is Sarah Ferguson. Sarah is the program director of the Vanderbilt Dietetic Internship Program. Sarah, thanks for being here today. Could you tell us a little bit more about what it means to be a dietitian?

SH: I am so excited to be here, and just want to thank you for this opportunity. I am really looking forward to our conversation today, and you started off with a great question. I am frequently asked, after sharing that I am a registered dietitian, what do I actually do in my role? What is an R.D.? So, I thought that we could start there, and it seems like you were right on that same track. Registered dietitians are health professionals who are really the experts in nutrition and human diets, and so their role is to really blend what's the science or evidence-based research, what is the behavioral science? Then, what are the social sciences? How do we take all of those together to promote health, prevent disease, and really just support individuals as they make dietary choices, to either keep themselves healthy or work to recover from an illness or from a sickness?

RB: Sarah, I couldn't think of a better person to have joining us today. Thanks for being here. Could you tell us a little more about our work with the Dietetic Internship and what that program is?

SF: The Dietetic Internship is a part of the training process to become an R.D., and so dietitians complete an undergraduate and graduate education, and then they also complete supervised practice hours where they are working with patients, training with different clinicians, and Vanderbilt has one of the longest running programs in the nation actually. So, it is truly an honor to be working as a director here and it is just really inspiring, frankly, to see the growth and development of our future nutrition practitioners. I've been fortunate enough to be working here as a dietitian at Vanderbilt for more than 10 years. So, I have seen nutrition in many different settings - In the inpatient setting, outpatient setting, and nutrition research, but now in education as well.

RB: Wow, I did not realize that about the dietetic internship program here, and as far as your experience, you are coming with a really diverse background and a lot of great experience. So, what we are diving into today is a really fun topic: aging. It is something we all do, but it's also something that can cause a lot of worry, as our bodies and minds change over time. So, Sarah, what is healthy aging and what does that mean to you?

SF: Thanks so much for that question. I would say, what comes to my mind first is jumping back to the World Health Organization's definition. They define healthy aging as the process of developing and maintaining our functional capacity in a way that allows people to enjoy well-being in old age. For me, I think that really means that the definition of healthy aging is an individual one. It's something where we get to acknowledge and recognize what are the things that really lead us to enjoy our lives. I love that this definition really focuses on the importance of enjoyment and functional capacity on our abilities to move and inhabit our bodies and engage with the world in a way that brings us meaning.

RB: So, even though aging is something we all do, it can be very vulnerable and people can have a lot of fears and concerns as they age. So, I love that

emphasis is on enjoying the process and finding where that joy really comes from.

SF: Absolutely, and of course for me as someone who is really passionate about food and nutrition, I find a lot of joy in cooking, and sharing meals with friends. I am really excited to talk a little bit today about brain health and aging in a way that we can choose diets and foods that might help that process.

RB: Absolutely, let's lean into your expertise and your experience. What nutrition-related recommendations help with a smoother aging process?

SF: So, it is a great question, and you know we know that there are so many influences in the process of aging, risk factors and healthy eating isn't going to be the thing that changes those, but it's a great modifier. We are thinking about healthy diet as playing a role in modifying risk factors associated with those age-related diseases. That's really where I think diet plays the biggest role. That might be that healthy patterns of eating could increase our bone mineral density, and our muscle mass so that maybe it prevents us from having a fracture as we age. Maybe it is a healthy pattern of eating decreases our inflammation, so it might prevent some of those diseases. Maybe it prevents cardiovascular disease, for example. And then, also, it might be that our patterns of eating could decrease our oxidative stress, which might lead to damage to our DNA. And so, in that way, it could increase our cognitive function as we age. But specifically, thinking about cognitive function and thinking about brain health, today I thought we could talk about a diet that I am excited about, called the MIND diet. And so, I thought that would be a really interesting place to start.

RB: Yes, so what I am really gathering is that food and nutrition, and choices that we make related to food can build this really helpful foundation for our overall health and specifically for our brain health. So, could tell us a little bit more about the MIND diet? What specifics can you share with us?

SF: Well, the MIND diet is based on the Mediterranean and the DASH diet. DASH stands for 'Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension'. Both of these diets have been associated through research with preserving cognitive function, and that is presumably through their protective effects against

cardiovascular disease. So, by preventing cardiovascular disease, that can in turn preserve our brain health. The MIND diet specifically stands for “Mediterranean-Diet Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay”. Now, that is a mouthful, and so of course, we are going to move forward referring to it as the MIND diet. What that really means is that it is the hybrid of both the Mediterranean and the DASH diet. What I think is important to kind of pause to acknowledge, is what are the commonalities between all three of these patterns of eating. All three diets really highlight plant-based foods, and limit the intake of animal or high-saturated fat foods. So, when we are thinking about the foundation or where the MIND diet came from, it was developed by a nutritional epidemiologist working at Rush in collaboration with some researchers at Harvard. They found research showing a correlation, or relationship, that links certain foods and the nutrients that are in those foods to their effects on brain function. Really, this whole pattern of eating associated with the MIND diet is focused on recommending specific brain-healthy foods, and then prioritizing those while limiting some of the foods that may be more unhealthy or may serve our bodies less than some of these other really brain-healthy foods.

RB: It sounds like the MIND diet is really rooted in evidence-based information then, which is really important. I know there are so many people out there who are searching for nutrition information that can be proven to help their health, and to help them enjoy that healthier aging process. So, could we break it down a little bit further into the day-to-day. What does the MIND diet encourage more of, and what might it encourage less of?

SF: so, I thought that I could speak to the big picture patterns and then later we might share some more resources on how you can learn about the specifics of the MIND diet, but at least when we are thinking about those foods that are encouraged, we are talking about whole grains, vegetables, green leafy vegetables like spinach or kale, nuts, beans, berries, poultry, fish, and then if you are using fat, choosing olive oil. So, when we are thinking about whole grains, I would love to just kind of run through, get some of your preferences. I know one of my favorite whole grains is quinoa. I am a big fan of quinoa. I love throwing it on salads or having it as a side dish. I also mentioned vegetables. Do you have a favorite veggie?

RB: Asparagus. Hands down.

SF: Okay, fantastic. So, we're thinking about how do we bring it from our imagination to our plates, and so thinking about a food or a dish that I had for breakfast this morning. I mentioned I love oatmeal, and so we talked about the whole grain benefits, encouraging this diet encourages more whole grains. But, I also make sure that I throw in some berries into that, because berries are also encouraged on the MIND diet. I might top it with some nuts because that's also on the list. And then, as we are moving to you know, maybe our lunch, we mentioned quinoa. So, throwing that on a green leafy salad, and then maybe if we are moving into dinner, having a serving of chicken with some beans and some asparagus. So, you know, this style of eating with the MIND diet is really meant to encourage us to find those foods that we really like in each of these categories, and then prioritize them. Look at what are the ways that we can boost or increase our intake of those foods, but also make sure that we are coming back to the importance of enjoyment, that we don't lose that part of it.

RB: It really sounds like the MIND diet simplifies a lot of nutrition information and recommendations out there. You get to take it from your imagination like you mentioned, to your plate, and get to take a look at that plate and what it offers you, and have some variety on that plate with lots of color and different food groups. It sounds like that is really the emphasis here.

SF: Absolutely. And so, it is something I mentioned earlier, why this diet is exciting to me, and of course healthy aging is something that I am really motivated by. I want to make sure that I am doing what I can now to support my health and my functional capacity for later. But, the reason that I am excited about this pattern of eating, is that it's really flexible. It is not a rigid meal approach, and so I think just like you said, there is some freedom in that, and there is a lot of opportunity for creativity. On the other hand, it also means that, you know, you might be kind of creating your own meal plan. That could be kind of overwhelming if you are not used to that. There are recipes and examples available online as well. But, I think that that really is what I like most about this, is that it almost can act like a checklist for your week, like a really holistic pattern of eating and so, since the diet specifically focuses on the daily or weekly amounts of food from those food groups to include, and so it is not giving those like really specific details. I

think that can really help to individualize it once you get supported with the information that you might need as well.

RB: So, really the difference here between the MIND diet as compared to other recommendations, seems to be this emphasis on a pattern, or building a lifestyle of healthy eating choices, and healthy eating options out there.

]And, again, an emphasis that this is not really something rigid. This is not a diet rooted in restrictions. Although, it does encourage less of certain foods, it seems it is more about the pattern of healthy eating. Can you highlight what some of those foods might be that it encourages less of?

SF: Oh, absolutely. Thanks for bringing me back to those. So, some of the foods that the MIND diet encourages less of, we're looking at pastries or sweets - some of those really sugary dessert products. Thinking about limiting our intake of red meat, and then having about one serving per week of fried foods. When I mentioned limiting our intake of red meat or pastries and sweets, those are the specific ones outlined on the diet, another reason that this pattern of eating sticks out to me is that the recommendations are less than five servings a week of sweets, or less than four servings per week of red meat. So, it is not eliminating these foods entirely from our diet, and I think setting some guidelines or encouragements that are pretty realistic, like having, you know, that something that you really love, knowing that you can incorporate, you know, some lamb on whatever dish that you are having, and maybe that you really do love ground beef and you can incorporate that too. We are thinking about balancing those foods with the other ones that they are really encouraging more of. So, thinking about it as how are we combining these together and just making sure that we are prioritizing kind of more of a moderate approach. Alcohol is also something that comes up in questions and is recommended in the Mediterranean diet. However, the MIND diet also has a more nuanced approach to alcohol, and so in the beginning when this diet was published, they did actually recommend wine. It was included., However, as they continued to explore this in subsequent trials, it was omitted. So, that was really because the effect of alcohol on each individual was really complex, and so they decided to not make a blanket recommendation about alcohol. That is why you will see it absent from the foods that are encouraged on the MIND diet where it might be encouraged on the Mediterranean diet.

RB: That is so interesting, and, again, brings us back to the purpose of the MIND diet and what it recommends – the fact that it is for that cognitive function, the brain health. So considering the foods that it encourages more of and less of, how does that tie into the brain health aspect of the diet?

SF: So, what they did, is that in their studies, they looked at these dietary components and associated them with a score and that score was tracked to cognitive health. So, they found that each of those nutrients kind of benefitted by increasing the cognitive health, increasing that score, that the study participants had overall.

RB: It sounds like someone can be confident then that every time they are choosing a whole grain at dinner, or any time they are incorporating some vegetables or berries, or lean proteins, that they are making real positive choices for their overall brain health and for their healthy aging process as well.

SF: Yeah, absolutely. Of course, you know nutrition research is always evolving, but I think that that is exactly right, we are thinking about what are the steps that I can do now as I am choosing foods that can really help me care for myself currently, and in the future.

RB: Sarah, you have done such a great job highlighting this, and giving us some great information to jump off of. I know a common concern for folks is accessing the right information in the right types of places. So, for someone who wants to learn more about the MIND diet and these types of nutrition recommendations, where would you recommend that they go to learn more?

SF: Well, one of the first places that I will send people if they are interested is the nutrition source, which is Harvard School of Public Health website. Since they were involved in the research that created this diet, I think that that is a really important avenue, is kind of going back to the originator, and exploring. They have just, I think, a really nice overview of details around the MIND diet, but just also some information from a comprehensive perspective. Then, if you are looking for recipes, I think looking for Mediterranean diet recipes is a really great place to start because, like I mentioned earlier, there is some overlap between the Mediterranean and

DASH diets, and so if you are looking for recipes for either Mediterranean or DASH, you will find some commonalities, but then just making sure to kind of emphasize, if it's berries, if it's those green leafy veggies, if it's beans or nuts, just thinking about how you might really increase those in that recipe itself, or just at another time that you are eating later in the week.

RB: Fantastic, Sarah. As you mentioned these resources we will definitely link to them in the show notes so that everyone can access those easily.

Sarah, I just want to thank you again. This has been such a insightful podcast conversation and I really appreciate you joining us today.

SF: Thank you, so much. It has really been an enjoyable conversation on my end, and just so grateful for the opportunity.

Thanks for tuning in to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness. If you are a Vanderbilt University Medical Center faculty or staff member, you can earn credit on your go for the gold wellness actions log by listening to two podcasts during season one. Simply click the go for the gold link in the show notes below to record your participation and stay tuned for future episodes.