

# SENSIBLE EATING FOR PERFORMERS

## Finding a healthy balance with the food you eat

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We are bombarded with facts and figures about what we should and shouldn't eat. It seems that, every day, new research findings are published about what's good for us and what's bad for us. We can end up confused: should we or shouldn't we eat chocolate, drink red wine or coffee? Is it better to be a bit overweight or a bit underweight?

It's doubly difficult for performers because of the lifestyle: long hours, gruelling rehearsal schedules, long periods of hanging around with nothing to do, late nights, and trickiest of all, being on tour ... Try to develop good eating habits while you're not under pressure: see what a difference it makes to your health – physical and mental – and then keep up the routines when the pressure is on.

You should aim to maintain a healthy, stable weight. Here are some of the basics about eating sensibly – written with performers' lives in mind.

### What is a 'balanced diet'?

A balanced diet is not just about cutting out those foods that are bad for you; you may need to add foods that are lacking. Your diet should contain the following:

- meat, fish, eggs, beans (main source of protein)
- fruit and veg (five a day)
- grains (rice, wheat, pasta, plus potatoes)
- milk and dairy
- fatty and sugary food (puddings and chocolate – as a treat!)

Broadly speaking, a balanced diet means eating something from the main five groups at every meal, or over the course of a day. These five groups are:

- carbohydrates
- proteins
- fats
- vitamins
- minerals
- in addition, you should make sure you drink enough water.

- **Carbohydrates** fill us up and our bodies turn them into sugar (ie energy). Low Glycaemic Index (GI) carbohydrates release sugar slowly and keep us going for longer. Go for unrefined carbs with more fibre: oats (porridge and oatcakes), brown rice, wholemeal and rye bread. With all these foods, though, the simpler the better – watch out for added sugar, salt and fat. If you have chips (occasionally!), choose thicker chips as they absorb less fat.

- **Proteins** are vital for building and repairing tissue – important for shiny hair and clear skin. There are lots to choose from: fish (especially oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and sardines), lean meat, eggs and dairy products, seeds, nuts and pulses. Vegetarians and vegans should make sure that they are getting enough protein – otherwise your skin and hair can suffer.
- **Fats** are an important source of energy. We need the right kinds of fats for our general health; they help transport vitamins around our bodies. They also make food more interesting. It is important to understand the difference between the two kinds of fat:
  - Saturated** fats should be eaten in very limited quantities. These are the ones that are solid at room temperature: butter, fat on meat, cheese, lard and so on. Processed food is often high in saturated fats.
  - Polyunsaturated** fats – those that are liquid at room temperature – are the healthy type: olive oil, and most nut and seed oils are especially good, as are the oils found in oily fish.
- **Vitamins** are essential for health. Our bodies can't make them on their own, so we need to get them from the food we eat. Broadly speaking, we need the different vitamins for the following:
  - A** – for eyesight, organ function, a healthy immune system (from green vegetables, carrots, dairy products, animal fat)
  - B** – the different **B** vitamins – for cell activity, healthy nervous system and skin (from cereals, meats, green veg, dairy products)
  - C** – for a healthy immune system (from fruit and vegetables, especially tomatoes and citrus fruits)
  - D** – bone health (from eggs, fish, butter and exposure to sunlight)
  - E** – (probably) for reproductive organ health and neuromuscular functions (from wheat germ, rice, green veg)
  - K** – for blood clotting (from egg yolk, fish liver, leafy green veg, yogurt)
- **Minerals** are needed in tiny amounts, and our needs change at different stages in our lives, but eating a healthy, balanced, varied diet means that we get the benefits without having to become experts in nutrition. The most important minerals we need are:
  - calcium** – for bones nerve and muscle function
  - iron** – very important for women, for the formation of haemoglobin in red blood cells. More efficient if taken with vitamin **C**.also important are: magnesium, phosphorus, sodium, potassium, fluoride, selenium, copper, chromium, manganese.
- **Water** is vital too. You should drink water during the course of the day, to keep you hydrated and alert. Fizzy drinks, tea, coffee and alcohol don't do the trick, and in fact can dehydrate you. If you're going to be on stage, or in an orchestra pit or recording studio for a long time, don't avoid drinking water because you think you will need to go to the loo. Your body loses 1.5 to 2 litres a day and you need to put it back. Eating juicy fresh fruit is good, too, AND it provides extra vitamins, minerals and fibre.

This is a very brief summary, but the main message is that you need to eat a varied diet with a **minimum** of five portions of fresh fruit and vegetables a day.

### Five a day - what counts?

You should aim to eat at least five portions of fresh fruit and vegetables a day. Note that cooking and processing destroys many vitamins. One portion is roughly 80g: an apple, a banana, two satsumas, a small bowl of green salad, three table spoonfuls of vegetables, a tablespoonful of dried fruit. Potatoes and other starchy vegetables don't count towards your five-a-day, but 100% fruit juices, beans and other pulses do – even baked beans!

You have lots of fruit and veg to choose from, especially if you get into the habit of eating what's in season – and try not to eat the same five, day in, day out.

### Supplements, food allergies and intolerances and crash diets

With a balanced diet, most of us don't need to spend money on supplements. For example, if you can't cope with cow's milk, you can get your calcium from other sources: cheese, yogurt or goat's milk. However, if you have concerns about your diet, or if you think you might have an allergy or intolerance, talk to your GP or a dietician rather than experimenting with your diet.

Unsupervised crash diets are a really bad idea; you run the risk of malnutrition, and depriving yourself of certain foods can affect your mood when you need to be in the best possible shape physically and mentally. Fad diets make it difficult when you're on tour or being entertained: don't get a reputation for being picky!

### Food and exercise for health

Eating healthily and keeping physically active are important to insure yourself against a number of illnesses and conditions:

- Cancer – it is estimated that a fifth to a third of the most common cancers could be prevented by maintaining a healthy body weight and being physically active.
- Cardiovascular disease – heart attacks are the leading cause of premature death in the UK, and high blood pressure can lead to strokes.
- Diabetes (type II) – eating too much fatty and sugary food greatly increases the risk of overweight and obesity, which in turn research shows that being overweight increases our risk of becoming diabetic.

**Note:** If you are diabetic, touring presents particular challenges as far as food is concerned. It's vital to plan ahead – take extra food with you to keep your blood sugar stable. Ensure you take enough of your medication with you (keep spares in your violin case). It's a good idea to let someone know you're diabetic, so that they can keep an eye on you when you're distracted.

Lifestyle is implicated in a number of modern illnesses. As well as lack of exercise, three ingredients are always at the top of the list of culprits:

- **Salt.** Excess salt leads to hypertension (high blood pressure). Most of the salt in our diet (up to  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) comes from processed foods including bread, breakfast cereal, soups and sauces. The good news is, if you cut down on processed food you will take in less salt. Also, don't reach automatically for the salt at the table.
- **Sugar.** Sugar does provide a quick burst of energy. But choose foods that release energy slowly and get your sugar fix from fruit. Processed foods contain by far the most sugar – not just the obvious things like sweets, fizzy drinks and biscuits, many 'savoury' foods such as sauces and tinned vegetables contain

sugar. As well as the inevitability of putting on weight, sugar on your teeth is also a great breeding ground for the bacteria that cause tooth decay, inflamed gums and halitosis (think of your colleagues if have to do a stage kiss!). And of course, **alcohol** is sugar! Use in moderation.

- **Fat.** Like sugar and salt, fat is vital to our health, but choose the 'good' fats, the polyunsaturated ones, rather than saturated fats and trans fats. If you steer clear of processed foods and cook with vegetable oil you'll keep your weight down.

### Learning about food

It all seems very easy: fill up on your five-a-day and avoid processed food. Get into the habit of reading the list of ingredients if you do buy processed food, and if you don't recognise anything, put it back on the shelf and buy a banana instead. Look out for the 'traffic light' labelling scheme used by some supermarkets: green for 'go'; amber for 'proceed with caution' and red for 'stop' – or 'eat in limited quantities'. When you read an article about nutrition, check who is sponsoring it – the food industry is notorious for making 'scientific' claims.

Invest in some glossy cookery books for inspiration, and adapt recipes to suit you; you don't have to follow them word-for-word once you learn the principles.

### Timing and touring, snacks and treats

One of the big problems for performing artists is having to eat late. If you can't eat beforehand, be careful not to eat a huge meal after the show: have a small healthy snack before you go on stage. If you eat too much too late, it will stop you from sleeping and you may be prone to gastroesophageal reflux which gives you heartburn and/or a nasty taste in the mouth. Eat smaller portions and less spicy food. If you're on tour and have to endure endless buffets, fill your plate with vegetables and salad, so that there is no room for the fattening things – and don't keep going back for more, just because it's there!

Don't be afraid to ask for a proper break in rehearsals or studio sessions. You'll be doing everyone a favour. When we are hungry or dehydrated we can't concentrate so well, and/or tempers become frayed.

Make sure your snacks are healthy ones: fruit, nuts, oatcakes, rather than cakes and biscuits. If you want to treat yourself, make sure it's not every day. If you comfort eat, think about what is causing you to use food in this way: it may be that you are bored or worried. You may consider counselling to help you understand your relationship with food.

Combine sensible eating with exercise – and above all, enjoy your food!

### SEE ALSO ...

**BAPAM Factsheet 5**  
**Keeping fit and healthy on tour**

**BAPAM Factsheet 6**  
**The drinks are on me!**

**British Nutrition Foundation**  
[www.nutrition.org.uk](http://www.nutrition.org.uk)

**For recipes and information**  
[www.bbc.co.uk/food](http://www.bbc.co.uk/food)