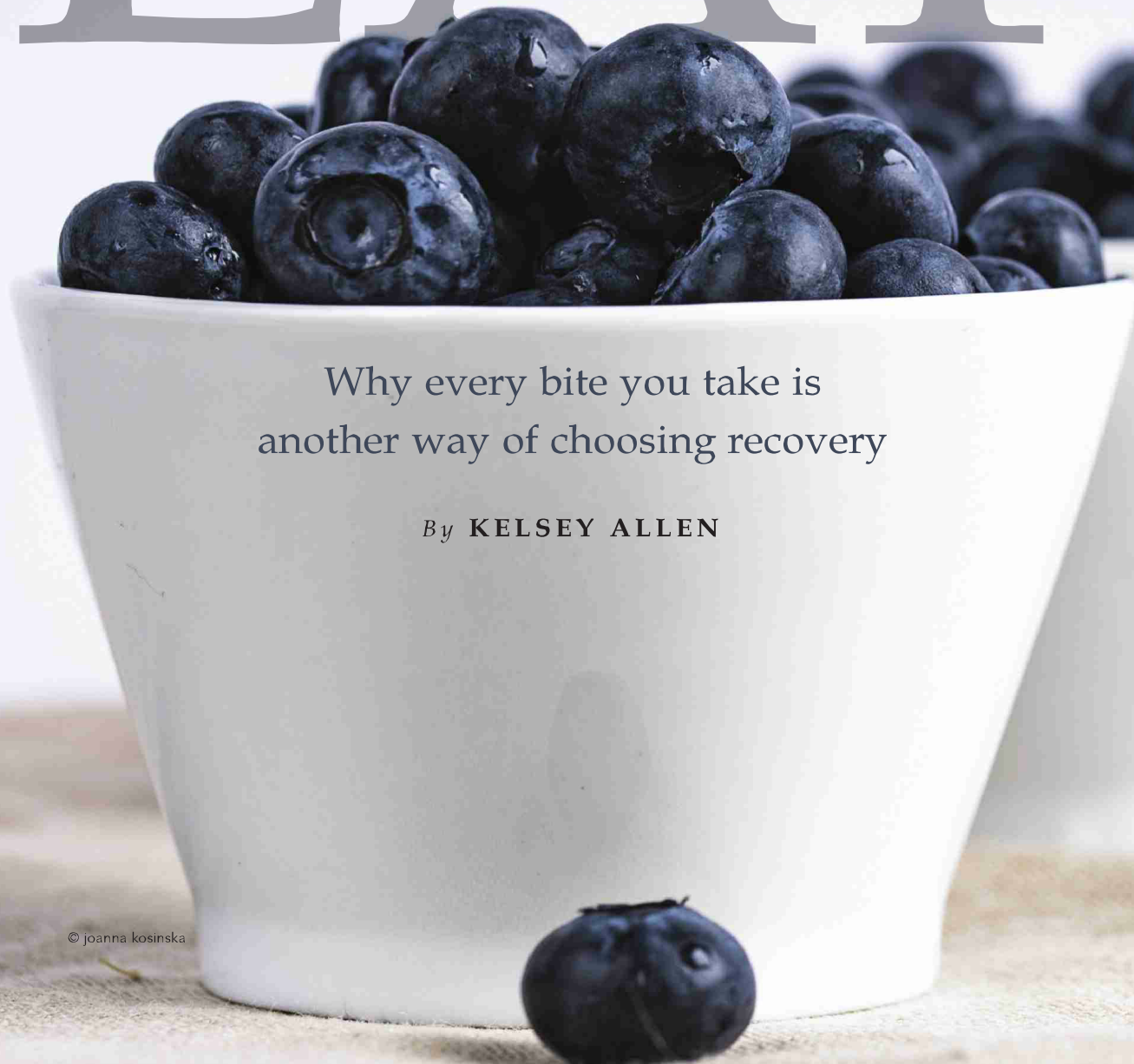


YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT



Why every bite you take is
another way of choosing recovery

By **KELSEY ALLEN**

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Derek Naylor was driving down the off-ramp of a freeway when he saw a guy standing on the corner who he could tell was in withdrawal — and Naylor would know. A former professional motocross racer, Naylor has broken dozens of bones and undergone multiple reconstructive surgeries. Opiates eased the pain.

Although he was two years sober, he didn't feel good. He sometimes skipped breakfast and ate fast food for lunch. If it was late and his wife wasn't home from work, he would throw a frozen package in the microwave and call it dinner. He devoured candy for dessert. When he woke up in the morning, he was still tired, and worse, he felt like crap. But he knew what would make him feel better.

"And that was that," says Naylor, who rolled down his window and asked the guy on the corner if he knew where he could get some dope. "I was sick and tired of feeling like garbage, and I found myself using all over again."

Now 18 months clean, Naylor says if he had received any nutritional support in treatment, maybe he wouldn't have had an excuse to use again.

He's right: Poor nutrition is one of the critical risk factors for substance abuse. Nutritional deficiencies can lead to symptoms of depression, anxiety, low energy, irritability — all of which can trigger a relapse. Eating well decreases the risk of relapse by 37 percent.

Yet proper nutrition and diet counseling are missing from most recovery programs.

David Wiss, founder of Nutrition in Recovery, is trying to change that. A registered dietitian nutritionist, Wiss provides specialized nutrition services to individuals and treatment centers.

"A lot of people assume that a nutritionist has a message of how to eat less," Wiss says. "I come into treatment settings with a message of, 'Let's talk about how to eat more of all these amazing foods.'"



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Instead of focusing on calories and quantity, Wiss emphasizes nutrients and quality.

"I get people to think about food as being very complex information that we send to our brains and to our gut, which, in turn, affects our mood," Wiss says. "There is no quick fix, no juice cleanse, no high-dose vitamin. It's about getting real with food. It's about starting one baby carrot at a time."

HOW YOUR GUT AFFECTS YOUR MOOD

Actually, it's about starting one microbe at a time. Inside the gastrointestinal tract are between 10 trillion and 100 trillion microorganisms. These microbes contain at least 1,000 species of bacteria consisting of more than 3 million genes and are crucial for the brain and mental health.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), gut bacteria produce hundreds of neurochemicals that the brain uses to regulate physiological and mental processes, such as memory, learning and mood. In fact, 95 percent of the body's supply of serotonin is produced by gut bacteria.

The brain can also influence the composition of the gut microbiome. Researchers at Swinburne University of Technology in Australia found that during exam week, university students' stool samples contained fewer lactobacilli (a "friendly" bacteria that breaks down food, absorbs nutrients, and fights off "unfriendly" organisms that might cause diseases such as diarrhea) than they had during the relatively carefree first days of the semester. Even mild psychological stressors can change the microbial balance, causing inflammation in the gut and making an individual more susceptible to infections.

This gut-brain axis is a complicated system, and one of the easiest ways to improve communication on the two-way street is to eat a healthy diet. Not only is the bacteria that lives in the gut incredibly responsive to change in diet, but one study found also that different diets created a variation in the abundance of different kinds of bacteria and in the kinds of genes they were expressing.



"This system is going to trigger us to be in fight or flight, or it's going to trigger us to be in rest and digest," says Victoria Abel, founder of the Center for Addiction Nutrition. "If we're using drugs and alcohol, we have negatively impacted the gut microbiome. We're not going to have that bacteria that fight viruses. We need that good bacteria that send a message to our brain that says we can rest and digest."

Because drugs and alcohol cause alterations in the absorption, metabolism, utilization and excretion of nutrients and disrupt the normal functioning of the body, nutrition can be used to help diminish some of these biochemical and digestive problems and support addiction recovery efforts.

Additionally, because eating sugary and highly refined or processed foods artificially stimulates the release of serotonin and elevates the serotonin levels in the brain, many people in early recovery report increases in sugar and caffeine cravings because of the brain's repeated exposure to mood-altering chemicals.

But if too many sugary snacks filled with simple sugars are consumed, then severe fluctuations of blood sugar levels in the body can occur, leading to a roller coaster of energy and emotion and triggering cravings for drugs and alcohol.

With proper addiction nutrition, people in recovery can help balance their depleted bodies and brains and decrease possible dependencies on sugar.

"Food is medicine," Abel says. "Every bite you take, every meal you choose, is another way of validating your worthiness, your deservability. You're saying, 'I choose myself. I choose recovery. I choose to heal.'"

WHAT TO EAT IN RECOVERY

Although research indicates that vitamin supplementation may also be used successfully to support addiction recovery efforts, Wiss and Abel focus on how to get the proper nutrients from food.

"Eat real food," Wiss says. "Learn how to go to the grocery store. Think of shopping as part of a spiritual practice. Learn how to prepare it for yourself. Use the cutting of vegetables as meditation. Connect with the food you eat, and make it part of your recovery program."

BALANCE

Alyssa Horton, aftercare director of Recovering Champions, a Massachusetts comprehensive treatment program specializing in substance abuse and co-occurring disorders, says the best way to keep your body and mind in balance is to eat foods that are clean and whole. "One great way to think about what you are eating is to choose foods that are healthy, quick and portioned," Horton says. "Think of the word 'balance.'"

- B:** Balanced meals, three a day with three snacks in between. Don't forget breakfast!
- A:** Avoid shopping in the aisles. The healthier, whole foods are on the outskirts of the store.
- L:** Limit caffeine. Try green tea. It has some caffeine but has many more benefits.
- A:** Avoid processed foods. They can be filled with sugar, salt, preservatives and chemicals.
- N:** Nuts are a great on-the-go snack. Try making your own trail mix.
- C:** Choose snacks that are quick but healthy: cheese sticks, nuts, fruit, raw veggies and hummus.
- E:** Eggs are a great source of protein any time of the day.

Here are some general guidelines for the types of foods to eat.

WHOLE FOODS

Follow *New York Times* best-selling author Michael Pollan's advice: "Don't eat anything your great-great-great grandmother wouldn't recognize as food." That means eating foods that aren't peeled, refined or chemically changed from their original state. Think a lightly baked potato with the peel instead of French fries and a ripe apple from the tree instead of a syrup-sweetened one from a can.

FIBER

The average hunter and gatherer ate 100 grams of fiber a day. Today, the average American eats about 8 grams of fiber a day, and Wiss says it's one of the most important nutrients that is highly overlooked. "The fiber we eat is food for the microorganisms that live inside our GI tract," he says. "People look at fiber as the thing that helps

you poop, but it's the food that supports the microorganisms in our GI tract that help us stay well in many dimensions of wellness." Skins and seeds are the richest sources of fiber, so eat whole fruits and vegetables.

PROTEIN

The amino acids in proteins serve as building blocks for neurotransmitters, so eat proteins from legumes, whole grains, brown rice, seeds, raw nuts and eggs. "People think of nuts as high-calorie foods, but the reality is they are high nutrient-dense foods," Wiss says. "I have my clients adding nuts and seeds to pretty much everything." Protein is also an essential component of breakfast, the most important meal of the day, Abel says. Eggs are an affordable and nutrient-dense food, so keep a bowl of hard-boiled eggs in the fridge.

FATS

Good fats help the body absorb fat-soluble vitamins. Choose olive oil, flaxseed oil and omega-3s,



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which are found in fatty fish, nuts and flax seeds. For healthy snacks throughout the day, Abel recommends pairing a protein and a good fat, such as nuts and cheese or celery and nut butter. "When your blood sugar gets low, you're not going to be thinking as well, and you might make some slippery choices."

Although every person is different and has unique dietary requirements, Abel offers an example of what a meal plan could look like:

- 1/2 to 1 liter of water upon waking
- Fruit
- Protein-rich breakfast: 2 organic eggs scrambled with spinach and feta; 1 slice 100 percent whole-grain toast or gluten-free toast; 1 teaspoon butter
- Snack: 10 almonds; 1 small apple

- Lunch: large romaine salad with assorted vegetables; 4 ounces of grilled chicken; olive oil and balsamic dressing with fresh herbs
- Snack: String cheese and carrot sticks
- Dinner: Salmon burger; steamed broccoli with 1 teaspoon butter; 1/2 cup quinoa or brown rice
- Snack: 1/2 cup organic cottage cheese with 1/2 tablespoon honey and cinnamon

"If we're eating garbage, we're telling ourselves that we're garbage," Abel says. "One of the easy things to do is change your relationship with food and use it as an affirmation every day that you're worth it, that you deserve to be healthy. Nutrition can help heal the body as well as the mind and spirit." ■

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