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Eating Wisely | BY HALE SOFIA SCHATZ

The Right Combination

Mixing too many foods at one time can trigger poor digestion.

Here's a practical guide to combining foods appropriately.



A basic rule for combining foods is: The simpler the meal, the easier digestion will be.

IF YOU'VE EVER TRIED to practice yoga right after a meal, then you know how uncomfortable your Downward-Facing Dogs and spinal twists can feel with a full or bloated belly. Even if you've finished eating several hours before stepping onto the mat, your body may still be working to digest

your last meal, which means less available energy for your practice. To keep your body feeling light and vibrant, look within—to your digestive tract.

The main reason we eat is to provide our bodies with the fuel we need to live—fuel for walking, thinking, making art, working, playing with our

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children, and doing yoga. But the very act of digestion also takes energy. You can assist your body's digestion before you even take the first bite of food.

If you think of the stomach as a blender that purees food into a molecular soup, then what you eat together at one time doesn't matter because it all gets mixed up anyway, right? Wrong.

Different foods have different digestion times and require different digestive enzymes. Therefore, eating too many kinds of foods at one time—such as proteins with grains, fats, and sugars, à la the common peanut butter and jelly sandwich—can result in difficult digestion. Eating the appropriate food combinations not only helps improve digestion, it can also increase energy, regulate elimination, and help relieve depression, anxiety, and mood swings. And increased physical energy means more vitality, clarity, and focus in all areas of life. Although food combining isn't a panacea,

it can ease digestion so that energy flows through the body unimpeded.

We do yoga not just for the sake of physical results, but so those results—a strong, supple, and receptive body—give us greater access to our spirit. Why should feeding ourselves be any different? Think of food combining as food yoga. By keeping the

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core of our bodies functioning with ease, we can access our inner selves more deeply because less of our attention is diverted to the physical.

A Process of Elimination

HOW OFTEN DO YOU actually think about the food that's being digested by your body? Most of us think about digestion

only when we suffer *indigestion*—bloating, gas, heartburn, constipation, diarrhea, and all the other unpleasant symptoms that quickly direct our attention to our bellies. Yet the digestive tract is the center of the body—the alchemical furnace in which what we eat is transmuted from separate foods into the fuel our bodies and minds need. The next time you eat something, think about when your food actually becomes *yog*.

The digestive tract has three basic functions: The stomach separates the food into smaller parts, the small intestine completes the breakdown and assimilates nutrients to supply to the rest of the body, and the large intestine eventually eliminates any remaining waste. Keeping this system in good working order is essential to overall health and vitality.

Digestive problems can arise as we age, undergo stress, eat too quickly or on the run, or eat diets composed of refined and rich foods, too much food, or foods eaten

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in complicated combinations. Eventually, the proper flow of digestive juices slows down, compromising the breakdown of foods in the stomach and small intestine. Like any plumbing system, the digestive tract can erode or get backed up, resulting in chronic diarrhea and/or constipation. If elimination doesn't happen properly, we don't receive the nutrients we need and toxic waste matter can remain in the system. This causes us to feel uncomfortable and lethargic; the flow of life energy is blocked.

The word *digestion* comes from the Latin for "separate" or "arrange." In fact, this is exactly what happens in the digestive tract: Nutrients, in the form of molecules, are separated from food and arranged through assimilation to provide energy for all the body's internal organs. With food combining, you assist digestion by separating and prearranging your food before it even lands in your stomach.

Although medical research hasn't yet been done on the specific benefits of food combining, this system, which has been around in various forms since the 1930s, is based on the understanding that eating foods in combinations that have compatible enzymes and digestive times makes for easier and more complete digestion.

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High-protein foods require the acidic medium of the stomach to be broken down, whereas carbohydrates require the alkaline or neutral medium of the small intestine. When high-protein and high-carbohydrate foods are eaten together, digestion becomes more complicated, since the transit time for carbohydrates is slowed by the breakdown of protein in

the stomach. If the breakdown is impeded, then the absorption of nutrients and elimination also may become more difficult, with undigested food particles remaining in the system. These undigested particles can create allergens, bacterial imbalances, and other disorders in the gastrointestinal tract.

A Simple Approach

IN MANY ASPECTS of life, with simplification comes less excess. The same is true for the body. In a world obsessed with abundance and the availability of every imaginable foodstuff 365 days a year, food combining helps us simplify our food choices. The basic rule of thumb is: The simpler the meal, the easier digestion will be. Simple meals, moderate portions, and chewing food slowly and with an attitude of reverence all help maintain easy digestion and free-flowing energy in the body. It doesn't take long to get the hang of food combining with these simple guidelines:

Food Combining for Easy Digestion

Vegetables, proteins, and grains

Improve your digestion and increase your energy by combining the appropriate foods at mealtime. Vegetables can be eaten with one another as well as with proteins, grains can be eaten alone or in combination with nonstarchy and low-starch vegetables, and proteins can be eaten alone or with any type of vegetable.

MONSTARCHY AND LOW-STARCH VEGETABLES			
Arugula	Chard	Lettuce	Scallions
Asparagus	Collard greens	Mesclun greens	Sea vegetables (arame, dulse, hijiki, nori, wakame)
Bok choy, pak choy, tatsoi	Corn (fresh)	Mizuna greens	Spinach
Broccoli	Cucumbers	Mushrooms	Sprouts
Brussels sprouts	Dandelion greens	Mustard greens	Squash (summer)
Cabbage (red, green, napa, savoy, Chinese)	Eggplant	Onions	Tomatoes
Cauliflower	Green beans	Peas	Turnips (white)
Celery	Kale	Peppers	Watercress
	Leeks	Radishes (red, black, daikon)	

STARCHY VEGETABLES	PROTEINS	GRAINS
Artichokes (jerusalem), Beets, Burdock, Carrots, Parsnips, Potatoes, Rutabagas (yellow turnips), Squash (winter), Sweet potatoes, Yams	Avocados, Beans, Eggs, Fish, Milk and other dairy products, Nuts, Olives, Poultry, Red meat, Seeds, Tofu and other soy products	Amaranth, Buckwheat, Millet, Oats, Quinoa, Rice, Spelt, Wheat and flour products

Fruits

Fruits should always be eaten separately from proteins, grains, and vegetables, since they digest so quickly. Based on their levels of acid and sugar, fruits are divided into four categories—acid, subacid, sweet, and melons. (Melons are the fastest foods to digest and should always be eaten alone.)

ACID	SUBACID	SWEET	MELONS
Clementines	Apples	Bananas	Canary
Grapefruit	Apricots	Dates	Cantaloupe
Kiwis	Berries	Dried fruit	Casaba
Lemons	Cherries	Figs (fresh)	Christmas
Limes	Grapes (most varieties)	Grapes (Muscat or Thompson)	Honeydew
Oranges	Nectarines	Mangoes	Musk
Pineapple	Peaches	Papaya	Persian
Pomegranates	Pears		Watermelon
Strawberries	Plums		
Tangerines			

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Fruits are the easiest and fastest foods to digest, and for that reason should always be eaten separately from proteins, grains, and vegetables. They are further classified into acid, subacid, sweet, and melons—based on their levels of acid and sugar—and have their own set of guidelines for combinations (see “Food Combining for Easy Digestion,” p. 51). Digestion time: 20 minutes to one hour.

All vegetables can be combined with one another as well as with proteins. For optimal digestive ease, it's best to combine only nonstarchy and low-starch vegetables with grains. Digestion time: 30 minutes to two hours.

Grains can be eaten alone or combined with nonstarchy and low-starch vegetables. Do not combine grains with protein or with starchy vegetables. It's best to

When selecting what to eat, consider how your body will interpret the foods you are about to ingest.

have only one type of grain at a meal, so decide if you really want that hunk of bread or if it's worth waiting for the rice. Digestion time: two to three hours.

Proteins can be eaten alone or combined with nonstarchy, low-starch, and starchy vegetables. It's best to have only one type of protein at a meal. Digestion time: two to four hours.

When selecting what to eat, consider not only the culinary appeal of your choices but how your body will interpret the foods you are about to ingest. Ask yourself: Will these foods fuel my body so it can be a strong vehicle for my spirit, or will they slow me down? Feeding yourself purposefully is like doing yoga off the mat: Each choice of what and how to feed yourself is an opportunity to practice awareness, compassion, and self-love. ■

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