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Balanced nutrition

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Balanced nutrition

The concept of 'balanced nutrition' is a difficult one to anchor to a particular idea, namely because it is used for referring to different things. Thus, we may be better off starting with some initial definitions of related concepts, and then attempt a summary of the possible meanings of the main concept of 'balanced nutrition'.

Let's start with the concept 'balance'. An appropriate dictionary meaning for balance when referring to nutrition is **to balance (tr.v.)** as "*1a (1): to compute the difference between the debits and credits of [...]; 4c: to bring into [...] proportion*", and **well-balanced (adj.)** as being "*1: nicely or evenly balanced [...]* <a well-balanced diet> [...]" (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2005¹*).

'Debits' and 'credits' are to be understood here as referring to either energy or chemical elements such as aminoacids. Thus, a balanced diet is that which provides energy in equal amounts to the energy spent in such a manner that the subtraction of one from the other yields 'zero'. Equally, in regards to nutrients, a balanced diet is that which provides those chemical elements (for example, aminoacids) in equal amounts to the elements lost (*Webb, 1995³*), in such a manner that the subtraction of one from the other also yields 'zero'.

As calculations of chemical balance are rather cumbersome, the middle-of-the-road strategy is to recommend proportions of nutrients or food that, once digested, would approximate the required chemical balance. For example, recommended dietary intakes work on the basis of proportion or amount of nutrients (such as protein, which would yield aminoacids), while food pyramids work on the basis of proportion or amount of food (such as meat, which would yield protein and, thus, aminoacids). In these cases, balance is achieved by proportionality of nutrients or foods. Such proportionality is in direct relation to the underlying chemical balance needed.

'Nutrition' and 'diet' are words also commonly used when referring to nutrition. Although both can be used for similar purposes, here may be advantageous to segregate them to particular meanings, thus gaining clarity and understanding.

For example, **nutrition (n)** can refer to both food and nourishment, as in "*1: the act or process of nourishing or being nourished; specifically: the sum of the processes by which an animal or plant takes in and utilizes food substances; 2: nourishment*", **nourishment (n)** being defined as "*1a: food, nutriment; b: sustenance*", and **nutriment (n)** as "*something that nourishes or promotes growth, provides energy, repairs body tissues, and maintains life*" (*all definitions by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2005¹*). However, by affinity, nutrition seems more appropriate for discussing nutriments and, thus, nutrients (that is, the component of foods) rather than food products. In this case, it is possible to talk of balanced nutrition as referring to either chemical balance or nutrient proportionality, or both.

Diet (n), on the other hand, is defined as "*1a: food and drink regularly provided or consumed; b: habitual nourishment; c: the kind and amount of food prescribed for a person or animal for a special reason; d: a regimen of eating and drinking sparingly so as to reduce one's weight* <going on a diet> (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2005¹*). Thus, a diet, by affinity, seems more appropriate for referring to food and drink products rather than to their nutrients. In this case, we could talk of

a balanced diet, an adequate diet, a healthy diet or a varied diet.

This leaves us with several ideas for which the concept of 'balanced nutrition' currently applies. Yet, we could also refer to those ideas with more appropriate concepts, and end up with a list of concepts such as the following:

- **Balanced nutrition** for referring to the equilibrium in the amount of energy or nutritional chemicals ingested in relation to the energy or nutritional chemicals spent (*Webb, 1995*³). A diet which provides either an excess or a deficiency of energy or nutrients is, thus, deemed to be unbalanced.
- **Balanced nutrition** for referring to the proportionality of nutrients in the diet (eg, [recommended dietary intakes](#)). Too much or too little of a nutrient, or several of them, over time is deemed to be unbalanced, leading to malnutrition or chronic disease.
- **Balanced diet** for referring to the proportionality of particular categories of foods (eg, the food pyramid). Too much or too little of foods from particular categories over time is deemed to yield an unbalanced or unhealthy diet.
- **Varied diet** for referring to 'eating with variety', for example, eating a variety of fruits and vegetables, or eating a variety of food products (*eg, Wardlaw, 1991*²). Thus, a varied diet may not necessarily be a balanced one in the sense that it provides all the required nutrients in adequate proportions, although it probably approaches a balanced diet reasonably well⁴.
- **Healthy diet** for referring to a diet focused on particular food products because of their health properties. For example, eating five (to nine) servings of fruits and vegetables a day, eating cereals rich in fiber, consuming omega-3 oils, etc⁵.
- **Healthy lifestyle** for referring to a combination of any of above with exercise, mainly, although you can also see further combinations with approaches such as stress management, spirituality, etc.

References

1. **MERRIAM-WEBSTER ONLINE DICTIONARY (2005)**. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary> on 27 June 2008.
2. **WARDLAW Gordon M (1991)**. *Contemporary nutrition. Issues and insights (5th edition)*. McGraw-Hill (Boston, USA), 2003. ISBN 9780072865301.
3. **WEBB Geoffrey P (1995)**. *Nutrition. A health promotion approach*. Edward Arnold (London, UK), 1995. ISBN 9780340610275.

+++ **Footnotes** +++

4. Although the food pyramid philosophy leads to this idea of a varied diet, the food pyramid is closer to a balanced diet insofar as it recommends that certain food products be eaten more frequently and in greater proportion than others, despite doing so with variety.

5. Notice that the concept of a healthy diet may also be used for referring to a balanced diet, however here we separate both concepts so that a healthy diet can be one that promotes health without it necessarily being a balanced diet. Diets for weight reduction, 'heart-friendly' diets, etc, are healthy diets, not necessarily balanced diets.

Want to know more?

[The Balanced Nutrition Index](#)

This is a database dedicated to researching the nutritional balance of food products, recipes and diets.

[Wiki of Science - Recommended dietary intakes](#)

This Wiki of Science page deals more deeply with international recommended dietary intakes, the cornerstone of balanced nutrition.

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