Nutrition -- to last a lifetime

By MAGGIE WHITE
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If you ask a child where food comes from, he or she might answer that it comes from a can or box. That is how far removed our culture has become from the earth.

When discussing nutrition and the biochemistry of aging with naturopathic physician Lori van der Heydt, she tells you that the majority of people in this country do not eat "real" food anyway.

Her definition of "real" food is that which doesn’t come with labels or ingredients that you’ve never heard of, ones filled with chemicals and growth with pesticides.

"You are only as good as your diet," she explains, and "much of what the majority of people eat is not food anymore. It’s harder to get the average person to put their hands on real food that hasn’t been processed. It’s especially tough getting people in rural areas with only a mini-mart."

Who would argue against the notion that your body or your life but the life in your years that matter? What you eat makes the difference.

Van der Heydt focuses her efforts on biochemistry, "the physical aspect... that is affected by your ability to digest your foods and your feelings," she says. Biochemistry is the study of the chemical processes and transformations in living organisms. Many researchers are looking at how aging affects our bodies at the cellular level and what can be done to live a fuller, longer life as we age.

Van der Heydt believes that good nutrition plays a key role in the biochemistry of the aging process as our digestive system takes in food and then metabolizes it correctly so that enzymes and other nutrients are properly assimilated.

"Good digestion is lifestyle," van der Heydt says, which means getting seven to nine hours of sleep a day; having work that fulfills you whether paid or volunteer; interests that feed your mind, soul and heart; and moving your body every day, whether it’s walking, yoga, swimming or some other activity.

"That is how you oxygenate your cells. It all affects digestion," she says. "If you are uptight, stressed and anxious, you cannot digest your food. Just because something goes in your mouth does not mean you have digested your meal."

One of the things she advocates for is more fermented food in the diet. Wild fermentation or lactic fermentation is essential for digestion. Among those foods most healthful are kefir, wild-fermented sauerkraut or miso.

Van der Heydt advises cutting down on sugar and being aware that sugar hides in fruits, fruit juices, soda pops and white starches. And she advises clients to connect with local farmers for their food.

Her approach to patients is individualized medicine.

"I usually start a consultation by asking what do you need most now," she says. Her approach is a combination of counseling and recommendations as to how to support the body’s own capacity for healing. If sleep is an issue, she might suggest herbs or other homopathic remedies or ways to quiet the mind through meditation, prayer or massage. The body should be physically tired, not just mentally, to encourage healthy sleep patterns.

Van der Heydt, who moved to Oregon from Arizona, began her interest in medicine as an undergrad pre-med student but was turned off by the competitiveness, the cheating and the fact class was "all about the grades." So she pursued a biology degree and then became a research assistant on skin cancer prevention by doing patient intervention and lab data. What she enjoyed was advocating for people because it was a study rather than a doctor’s visit.

Library research on various medical fields led her to pursue naturopathic medicine.

"I found that the philosophy differed from conventional medicine," she says. "Our belief is the body will heal itself if you remove the obstacle to healing. Achieving good health is first."

The conventional approach is 15 or 20 minutes to see a patient for diagnosis and to write prescriptions. Her initial consultation is an hour and a half. She might ask you for a diet diary so she will know what you eat for breakfast and snacks, as well as what you crave and what you avoid, before determining what course of action would work.

Van der Heydt goes so far as to take a patient shopping so she can point out foods that should be part of your nutrition and what they look like, or she might send you to New Seasons so you can walk you through gluten-free products, for example, or cooking classes to learn how to cook "real" food.

Photo by L.E. Baskow

Lori van der Heydt, 51, works her way through her community garden picking fresh produce and flowers.

By L.E. Baskow

Naturopath Lori van der Heydt checks a patient’s blood pressure in her office at the Beaumont Health Clinic in north Portland.

Photo by L.E. Baskow

Nurathropist Lori van der Heydt looks at patients blood pressure in her office at the Beaumont Health Clinic in north Portland.

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Van der Heydt believes that improving the general health of the community goes beyond just improving nutrition. She says listening is a vital part of health care and that the conventional approach appears to put profit before health.

"There is consequence to every action," she says. "I would like to see that overhauled and food advertising overhauled as well. The obstacle to a cure is a social system of inequality, and it’s all policy."