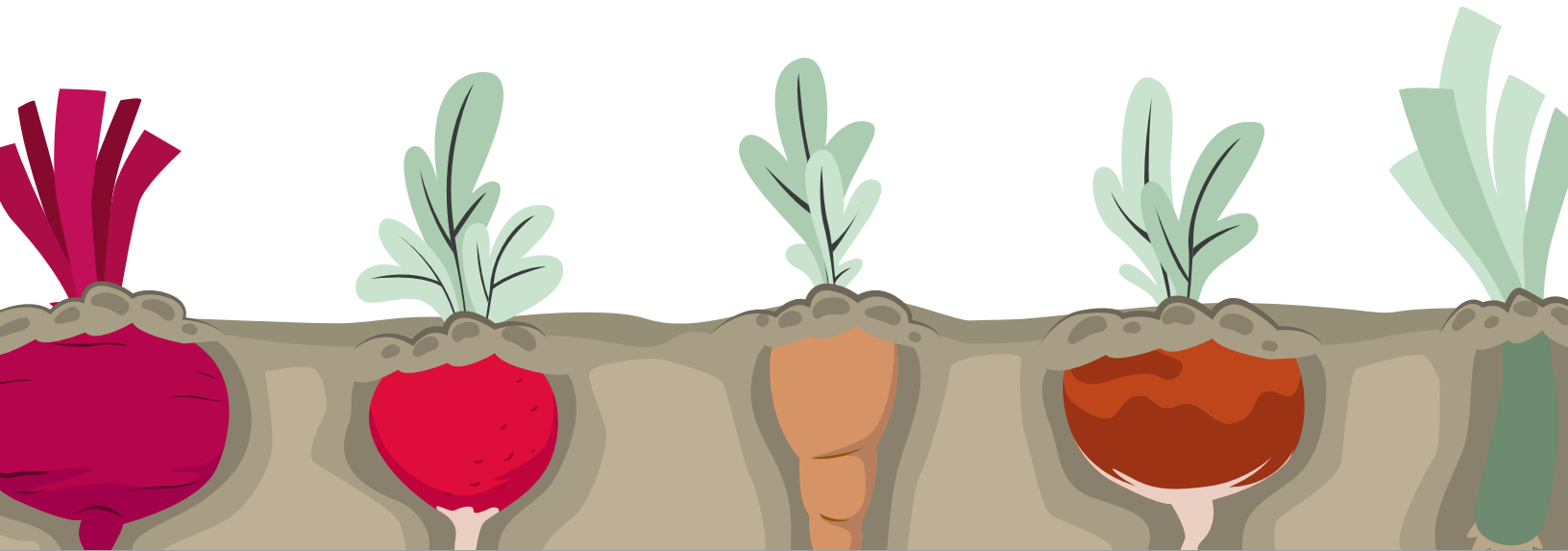


EATING WELL:

THE MAYO PRESCRIPTION FOR GOOD NUTRITION



AN EXPERT INTERVIEW WITH DR. DONALD HENSRUD

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EATING WELL: THE MAYO PRESCRIPTION FOR GOOD NUTRITION

with
DR. DONALD HENSRUD

ABOUT DONALD HENSRUD, MD, MPH



Dr. Hensrud is an associate professor of preventive medicine and nutrition in Mayo's Graduate School of Medicine and the medical director for the Mayo Clinic Healthy Living Program. A specialist in nutrition and weight management, Dr. Hensrud served as editor in chief for the best-selling book *The Mayo Clinic Diet* and helped publish two award-winning Mayo Clinic cookbooks.

ABOUT RYAN PICARELLA, MS, SPHR



As President of WELCOA, Ryan works with communities and organizations around the country to ignite social movements that will improve the lives of all working people in America and around the world. With a deep interest in culture and sociology, Ryan approaches initiatives from a holistic perspective that recognizes the many paths to well-being that must be in alignment for long-term healthy lifestyle behavior change. Ryan brings immense knowledge and insight to WELCOA from his background in psychology and a career that spans human resources, organizational development and wellness program and product design. Prior to joining WELCOA, Ryan managed the award winning BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee (BCBST) Well@Work employee wellness program, a 2012 C. Everett Koop honorable mention awardee. Since relocating to Nebraska, Ryan has enjoyed an active role in the community, currently serving on the Board for the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition in Omaha. Ryan has a Master of Science in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Northern Arizona University.

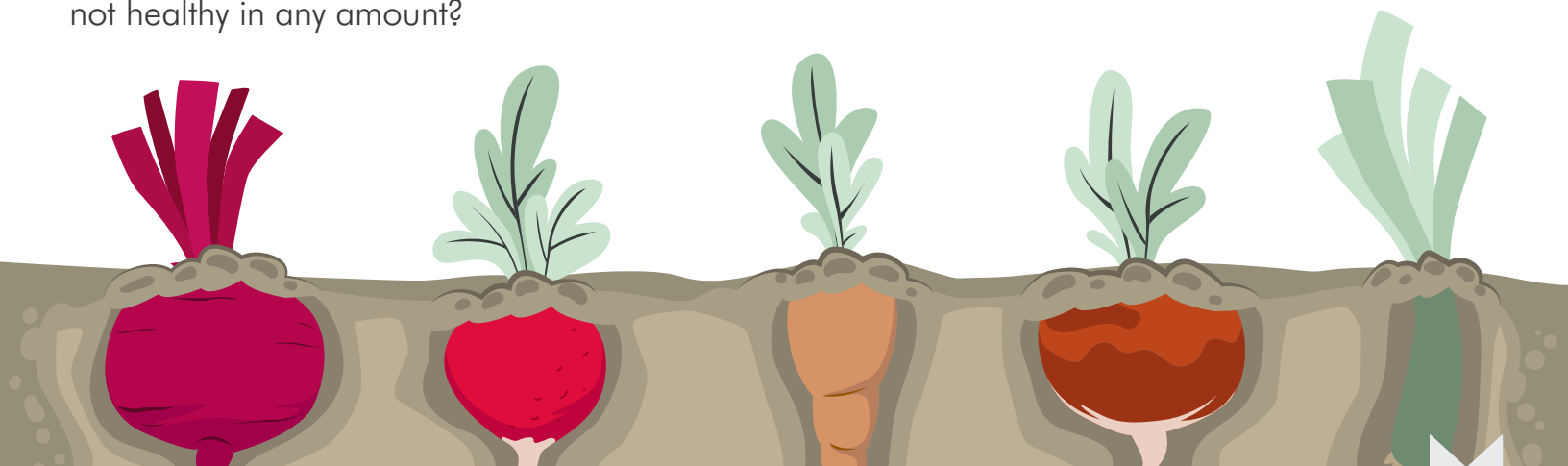
Imagine walking in the shoes of a Mayo Clinic Physician. What questions do they ask their patients about their diets and how does one of the most advanced models of care achieve healthy eating compliance in the real world? WELCOA President Ryan Picarella sits down with Dr. Donald Hensrud for the Mayo perspective on food.

★ **RYAN PICARELLA** As a physician at Mayo and someone who has been doing this for a long time, how would you describe your philosophy when it comes to healthy eating?

DR. HENSRUD Nutrition can be complicated even though it does not have to be. Everybody eats. Everybody has their own opinions and sometimes—in fact, often—biases about nutrition. But if we look at the overall evidence and not get too much into the details, I think the evidence shows that a plant-based diet that is mainly comprised of real food is the healthiest way to eat—lots of vegetables, fruits (preferably fresh or frozen), whole grains such as whole-wheat, other whole grains, brown rice, oatmeal, lean sources of protein and dairy (if people are able to consume dairy), low-fat dairy products, things such as fish and other lean sources of protein, and heart healthy fats such as olive oil or nuts. I have met *few* people who have had a perfect diet. A few things creep in now and then for practicality reasons or for enjoyment reasons, but it is what we eat most of the time that matters overall to our health. So a diet based on real food with generous amounts of plant products can really promote health and go a long way.

★ **RP** You always hear, “everything in moderation.” What are your thoughts on whether this is really true? There are schools that would say there is no such thing as moderation—that things like a cheeseburger and fries are not healthy in any amount?

“I have met *few* people who have had a perfect diet. A few things creep in now and then for practicality reasons or for enjoyment reasons, but it is what we eat most of the time that matters overall to our health.”



DR. HENSRUD One of the things that I find a lot of people do is mix objective data with subjective factors. What do I mean by that? Objective data is what the scientific literature tells us. What do studies show about the healthiest way to eat? Subjective factors are the things that really influence what we eat on a practical basis—things such as cost, convenience, what we grew up eating, what we like to eat, indulgence, that type of thing. Lots of times people mix those two factors.

I would suggest that on an objective basis, a plant-based diet composed mainly of fresh or frozen fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean sources of protein and heart-healthy fats is the best for us. Having said that, those practical enjoyment factors, those *subjective* factors often influence what we do. So I think we need to keep in mind what the healthiest diet is while realizing that we are all on this continuum of moving toward that. Some people are at one end of the continuum more than others. All of us should strive to do that, keeping practicality and enjoyment in place.

A specific example of this is, if I see a cattle farmer for a health checkup and his business and his enjoyment is eating red meat, it would be unlikely that I am going to convince him that the vegetarian diet is the best thing for him. Are there things that he can move a little bit more along the spectrum toward a plant-based diet like including more plant products and trying to moderate the intake of animal products in his diet? Other people are further along. They may be eating predominantly a plant-based diet but there are some tweaks they make like cutting out processed foods or cutting back on sugar to move a little bit further along the spectrum. We can all move toward that objective endpoint of *the healthiest diet* realizing that it is more challenging to get to that point and many of us do not feel ready to eliminate all those foods completely. If people can do it, great. If not, keep working toward that goal.

★ **RP** Is there one food item that, if we all *could* live without, that you would recommend we stay away from?

DR. HENSRUD Staying away from sugar is probably number one. Red meat and processed meat are number two. Then number three would probably be processed food in general. Why do I say that? Well, in terms of sugar, all it adds is extra calories to our diet and no nutrients. So it is contributing to increased calorie intake and increased weight. It does not supply any vitamins or other nutrients, and we need those vitamins and other nutrients to help metabolize the carbohydrates or the other foods that we are eating. If we do not get that then that taxes the body. Another reason that sugar is problematic is that if someone is consuming sugar they are probably not eating something else that is healthier such as consuming soda instead of a healthier beverage. Then, finally, there is a direct toxic effect of sugar. Dental cavities

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is the most obvious thing, but there is some evidence that it may impact health in other ways because of the direct toxic effect. So there are multiple reasons why sugar should be decreased in the diet.

Red and processed meats are probably number two on the list in my opinion. The reason why is they contain saturated fat that can increase cholesterol. They have been associated with increased cancer, specifically colorectal cancer, and other cancers and they have also contributed to increased cardiovascular disease and increased overall mortality. So for those reasons I think that if we can decrease our intake of those things as much as possible, our overall health will benefit.

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★ **RP** So when you are working with your patients at Mayo who are struggling with eating a healthy diet, how do you begin to coach them into modifying their diet? Knowing that you are a proponent of sustainable lifestyle change over a “diet”, what advice do you give your patients when working with them on making some small changes?

DR. HENSRUD The first thing I do with my patients is take a quick diet history. I ask them what they eat on a typical day for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks. This question may not provide extremely quantitative data, but it does give me an idea about what they consider important in their diet and what they commonly consume. So it is a good starting point. Then I work with them on a couple of areas such as increasing fruit and vegetable intake. That is a very common one that I talk to people about. It is a positive message. It is associated with better health and it is easier to increase the intake of something than it is to cut back on something.

When counseling patients, we often tell people what not to do all the time. We need to focus on the positive and practical aspects of enjoying food as well. If I do have patients telling me they are eating a large quantity of something such as red meat or processed meat, we might talk about not necessarily eliminating it altogether but cutting down on portion size and going for quality instead of quantity. If people still want to consume some meat, we tell them to try not to consume so much of it, to cut down on the total amount. There are many, many different ways of improving diet, and most people can benefit from at least a few of them, moving them on the spectrum toward a healthier diet.



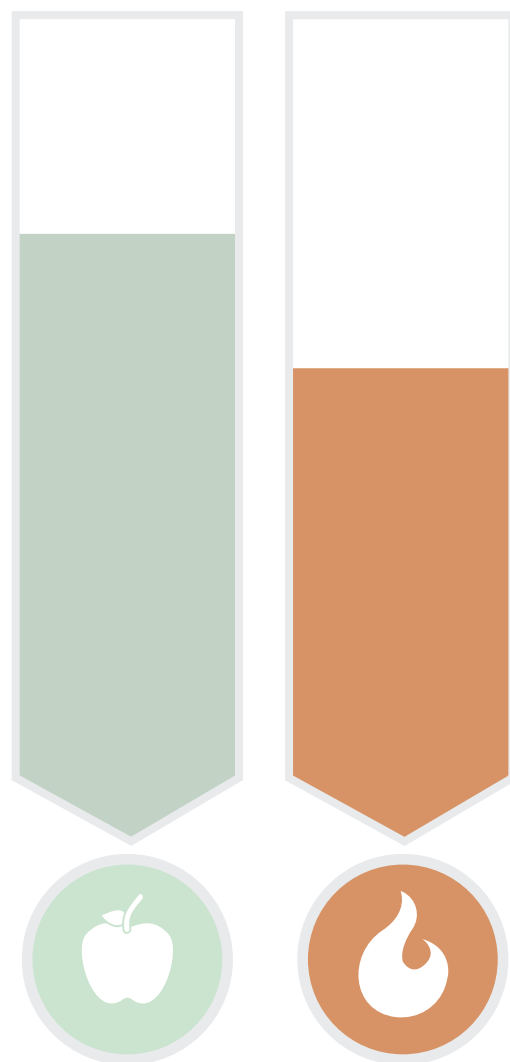
★ **RP** What are your thoughts on calorie counting? I know that was a popular thing and there are tons of apps that can count your calories per day. Is that something that you encourage people to do, or do you just focus more on adding more fruits and vegetables rather than specific calories?

DR. HENSRUD So first of all, calories do count. There are things that can modify the energy balance equation, and what I mean by that is *calories in versus calories burned* equals weight. There are things that can modify that, but in general calories count. The problem is we are not very good judges of how many calories we consume. There was a study about 15 years ago that looked very carefully at calories consumed by people who were trying to lose weight. These were people who reported having tried everything to lose weight with absolutely no success. When they used very detailed methods to count the calories that they were consuming and the calories they were burning, they found something quite surprising.

Compared with what people thought they were consuming, they actually consumed about 47 percent more calories than what they thought, and they burned about 50 percent fewer calories than what they thought. It is not anything intentional or devious but we are just not good judges because the volume of food does not always equal the number of calories. Another point is calories do not fill us up. People do not say *I have had 500 calories and now I am full*. It is the volume or weight of food that we consume that fills us up. So what we do with the Mayo Clinic diet—which is actually a lifestyle rather than a diet—is help people focus on generous intakes of plant products, fruits and vegetables.

In fact, even if people are trying to manage weight, we recommend eating all the fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables that people that people want to consume, because, if they are doing that, they are not eating something else that is less healthy or higher in calories. Let me give you an example. There is the same amount of calories in one and a third sticks of butter as there is in 10 or 11 heads of lettuce or 35 cups of green beans. It just shows how much more plant products you can eat and get in a lot fewer calories and improve your health in the process. If people are very good at counting calories that is one method to use. There are many different ways of following a diet and actually turning it into a lifestyle. We emphasize servings and trying to increase servings from some of the healthier plant foods.

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★ **RP** I am going to throw out some debated topics to get your thoughts on. One is GMOs, genetically modified organisms. The second is the debate between organic versus conventionally grown organisms. The last of these controversial topics I'd like to get your thoughts on the effectiveness of nutritional supplements and vitamins. Does Mayo address any of those elements in particular?

DR. HENSRUD So you raise a number of good points here. First about GMOs. If you look at the literature supporting genetically modified organisms or GMOs, there has not been one adverse effect from a genetically modified food. The fear is that at some point there may be but there has not so far. Frankly, we have been modifying food genetically for many years. Just selective breeding is a way of modifying genetics. I think if we are going to feed the world we need to look at certain modifications to assist in doing that effectively. There are examples where it has helped. For example, the papaya industry in Hawaii was saved through a genetically modified papaya. There is now a rice that includes more vitamin A to help with vitamin A deficiency which is a problem in much of the world. So at this point it appears the benefits outweigh the risks, and the risks are theoretical with regard to GMOs.



Group enjoying a Healthy Cooking class in the Mayo Clinic Healthy Living Program's Participation Kitchen

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With regard to organic versus nonorganic, people commonly believe that there is a very large difference in the nutritional value of organic versus food that is not raised organic. There is a little bit of evidence but not nearly as much as what people think. The health benefits of just eating plants in general whether they are organic or not organic are far superior to not consuming them. The way I look at organic versus nonorganic is that it is an environmental issue, and certainly if people are concerned about the environment they should try to eat organically. I am a big proponent of eating local because you are supporting the local economy and it is often organically grown. There are many advantages. Some vitamins degrade with time. Vitamin C for example degrades over time. So if you are eating local and fresh, you are getting more vitamins in that sense. So I strongly support farmer's markets and eating locally. If people want to eat organic that is up to them in terms of their concern for the environment.

Finally, the last issue you raised was supplements and vitamins. There is a lot of belief out there including among many health professionals—some of whom work in nutrition—that the benefits of supplements outweigh the risks. Frankly, there isn't a lot of evidence for the vast majority of dietary supplements, and there are some risks. There are different reports of contaminants or lack of quality control among certain vitamins and supplements. So there are relatively few that people should consume on a regular basis at least based on data. There is some evidence for vitamin D and perhaps a little bit for calcium and certain others depending on someone's own health issues. However, even for a multivitamin, if you look closely at the data, there isn't a lot of data supporting a multivitamin. In fact, there is even some data suggesting there may be some risks of simple multivitamins. So sticking with real food is by far the best insurance policy for overall health.

★ **RP** Great advice. A lot of our listeners and readers are going to be health promotion practitioners and I think we are always looking for ways to begin to educate the organizations we serve on how to begin to introduce better nutrition into a worksite. I know Mayo has done an incredible job with their own employee wellness program and also in working with patients. What advice would you give the health promotion practitioners out there who are looking for the best way to bring these concepts into the worksite?

DR. HENSRUD The first advice I give people is *decide what your goals are and what type of diet or nutritional pattern that you are going to recommend to all your employees*. It is important to know where you want to get before you try to set up how you want to get there. Along those lines, look for accurate and credible health information. That is something that we try to do here at Mayo Clinic—provide credible and accurate health information in nutrition and many other areas. So helping to connect people to a good philosophy about food is the foundation, then we really need to recognize overall that everybody is on a spectrum.

We need to move the choices that we offer people to a healthier *range* of choices, while taking practicality and enjoyment into consideration and maintaining a positive message around food. By providing great-tasting food to employees with a positive message, we can get a lot further than we would by trying to come across as the food police or incorporating a negative *you cannot eat this* attitude. There are a lot of different variables to designing programming around food like what vendor options they have and how many employees organizations are serving, but those are some basic things that people should keep in mind when trying to provide healthier nutrition for their employees.

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★ **RP** Love it. Great advice. Now I want to get a little bit personal. Describe a typical night at dinner with your family. How do you help your kids and your family with learning about how to eat?

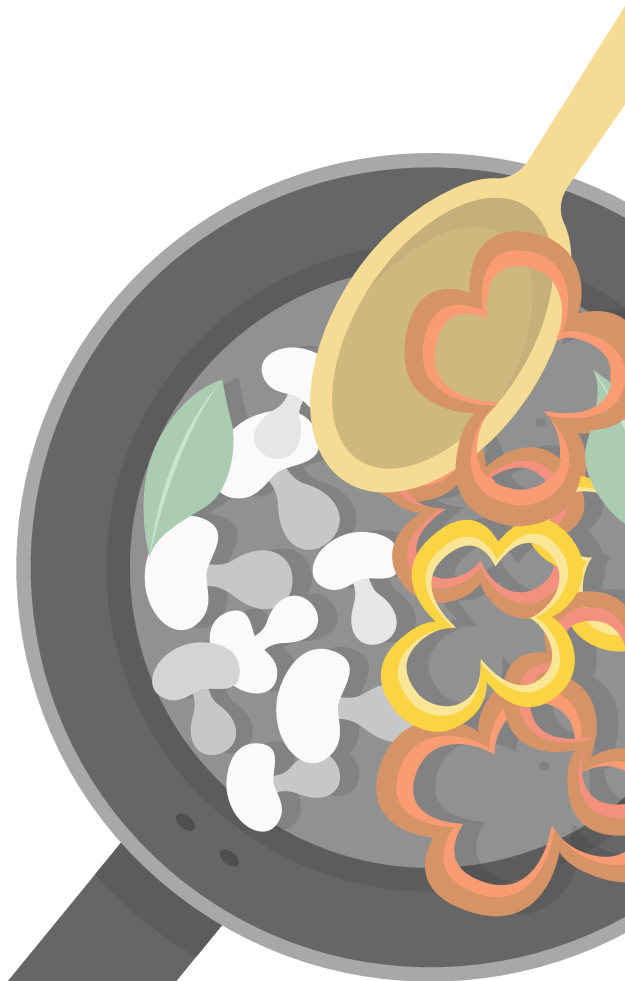
DR. HENSRUD Yeah. Great question. I do not mind being asked about personal health habits. I think it is important to keep in mind though that what the data show is most important. Again, everybody has their own way of adapting advice and data to their own personal health habits. We really try to practice what we preach at home. We try to stay physically active. We try to eat well. That does take a little bit of time, but I think people sometimes focus too much on not having as much time as they would like. Well, nobody has as much time as they would like to have, and I think it is more a matter of priorities rather than time. We juggle a lot of things in our life, but this is so important. The return on investment of a healthy lifestyle, of incorporating physical activity, of incorporating healthy dietary habits is huge. Our health is our biggest resource. So the little bit of time that it takes is worth it. We try to be active with our kids to get exercise in, and we do active things together outside.

When we eat at home, we involve our kids in choosing meals. Letting them participate in meal planning gets them fired up about nutrition. We try to present food to them with a positive attitude; we don't take away all the treats. We support them having treats now and then, but just maintain certain guidelines. When we cook at home, we make what I think all of us would consider an enjoyable meal, a tasty meal and a healthy meal.

★ **RP** I came from a big Italian family, and it was always important to cook and eat with your kids. We carved out time at least every Sunday to cook together and to sit down at a table—not a couch—and share a meal together. I love that you guys still do that and share that with your kids. I have really appreciated hearing your thoughts. Anything else that you would like to add that I did not specifically cover?

DR. HENSRUD No. We covered a lot. I would just like to reinforce that eating well and eating healthy are not mutually exclusive. There is a lot of wonderful food out there, a lot of different ethnic foods, traditional cuisine. I look at our journey through life as a nutrition journey as well. Our taste preferences change, and seeking out good-tasting and healthy food can be a very enjoyable experience. 🏠

“Everybody has their own way of adapting advice and data to their own personal health habits.”



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