



EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF
DERMATOLOGY AND VENEREOLOGY

Information Leaflet for Patients

A HEALTHIER PSORIASIS

The aim of this leaflet

This leaflet is designed to help you understand more about having a healthy lifestyle with psoriasis. Information included is about how to have a healthy diet, exercise, stress management, adequate exposure to sunlight, and avoidance of smoking and excessive alcohol use.

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Why have a healthy lifestyle with chronic psoriasis?

The long-term nature or chronicity of psoriasis poses a heavy burden, as it is carried throughout your life. But a healthy lifestyle will make it easier to bear and to help you control psoriasis and its comorbidities. What is a healthy lifestyle? It includes a wide range of good habits: a balanced diet, sufficient exercise, minimal stress, well-balanced sun exposure, and so on. Read the tips below and find out what a healthier lifestyle can do for you!

1. What does it mean to have a balanced diet?

A balanced diet means introducing variety into your diet instead of a narrow diet (such as omitting certain foods). Unless this is prescribed by a doctor, avoiding certain foods is not in your best interest. Recently, many “foodies” promote a diet based on “superfoods” (thought to be particularly healthy), but this is also a narrow diet. So, let’s look at the basic principles of a healthy diet.

First of all, **stay hydrated** by drinking a lot of water. Not only does your skin need hydration, but you do too. Do you think that water is too boring? Add flavour to your water by adding cucumbers, blueberries, strawberries, mint, lemon, spices, and so on. Make a refreshing combination by adding 1 slice of lemon with 5-6 mint leaves and 6 thin slices of cucumber in 1 liter of water; adapt to your liking.

Secondly, always start a meal by **choosing vegetables**. Actually, we’re supposed to eat 300 grams of vegetables each day; however, most of us only get to about 140 grams. So, it’s time to do something about it. A very good hint is to fill at least half of your plate with vegetables, during lunch and dinner. Vegetables provide important nutrients as they contain juice, fibre (essential for a good intestinal transit), vitamins, and minerals, and most importantly they are low in calories. So, no holding back! As soon as you have chosen the vegetables for your meal, complement them with proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. For

instance, a spaghetti is actually a very good combination of these nutrients, but often the proportions are not balanced. It is better to first fill half of your plate with the sauce (based on vegetables) before filling your plate with pasta. Therefore, fill half your plate with sauce, one quarter with spaghetti (75-100 grams dry weight per adult), and one quarter with proteins. The latter can be meat or legumes. Regarding carbohydrate sources such as pasta and rice, it is best to opt for whole wheat. Not used to the flavour? Don’t worry, tastes can be acquired. Start by mixing whole wheat and non-whole wheat and gradually increase the amount of whole wheat. You’re probably thinking, why do I need to go through this? As it turns out, your intestinal transit will improve, but you will also absorb much more iron, which is often thought to be beneficial for dry and scaly skin. In other words, this is how foods can help you improve the quality of your skin. It will take some time, but if you keep this up for 2 weeks, you may already see results.

We all know the terms saturated and unsaturated fats. Generally, we can assume that unsaturated fats are healthier than saturated fats. But how can you make a distinction? Both fats differ in their composition chemically, which gives them different characteristics. Saturated fats have a solid consistency at room temperature whereas unsaturated fats are typically liquid at room temperature.

Let’s start with unsaturated fats. These healthy fats are mainly found in plant foods and fish. The most famous fish fatty

acids are omega-3-fatty acids, which can be bought as supplements as well. On the contrary, saturated fats are usually found in animal foods; meat and dairy products are often high in saturated fats. An exception to the rule is coconut oil: this tropical fat originates from a plant but is solid at room temperature, and is thus a saturated fat! Nowadays, coconut oil is hyped as a “healthy” fat, but know that as a saturated fat, it is not a suitable replacement for healthy liquid fats. However, coconut oil may be justified when food needs to be heated to 220°C, which makes it healthier than animal fat. In addition, its neutral taste may be preferred in the preparation of some dishes. Yet, it is important not to be swept away by the “superfood hype” surrounding coconut oil. Use unsaturated fats as much as possible while cooking.

A third basic principle is to **eat in moderation**. Often, we’re not conscious about how much we eat in one day. Generally, men can take in up to 2500 kilocalories (kcal) per day, whereas women should eat up to 2000 kcal per day. However, this is on average; the person should not gain or lose weight. In other words, calorie intake is well-balanced with calorie-burning. So the take-home message here is to adapt your calorie intake according to how much energy you will spend in a day. For instance, a day at your desk without exercise will demand less calories than a day where you’re exercising and managing your household.

Of course, eating in moderation is not easy; especially when eating and drinking is linked to social events. So, how do you eat in moderation then? Start your day with a healthy and balanced breakfast, laying the foundation of your energy supply for the rest of the day. Depending on what kind of breakfast you’ll have, you can actually control how many “snacks” you’ll need during the day.

Eating in moderation also means looking at your portion sizes. To get an idea of how much you eat, keep a diary for 1-2 weeks: register everything you eat and drink, including the little treats at work or the

appetizers at a friend’s place. Take it a step further and calculate how many calories, fats, sugars, and salts you have consumed. Nowadays, there are many websites and apps that help you keep track. Be honest and register everything. This way, you’ll end up with an overview of where those extra calories sneak up on you, and hopefully this will make you more conscious

when you eat and drink. If you’re used to eating snacks, opt for healthier alternatives such as fruit and vegetables that are easy to take along and don’t leave a mess (e.g. blueberries, apples, cherry tomatoes, or carrots). Soft drinks may also be a hidden source of extra calories and so are alcoholic beverages; it is important to consume them in extra moderation and opt for (flavoured) water instead.

As mentioned earlier, social events are often intertwined with eating and drinking, but this shouldn’t stop you from eating healthy in moderation. Feeling pressured? You can try these tips: make a deal with yourself in advance about how many soft drinks and alcoholic beverages you’re allowed to drink on a night out. Drink water in between the high-calorie drinks, or once you reached the maximum amount of allowed drinks, switch to water for the rest of the event. If you’re out for dinner, ask your companion to share the appetizers or dessert; that way you can still enjoy the menu, but in moderation. As for dinner, try a salad for a change, or order a vegetable side dish to make sure you’re eating enough vegetables. More importantly, let people know you’re trying to eat in moderation and ask their help; let them know that you don’t want them to insist with snacks. In fact, introduce them to healthier variants of appetizers and snacks to inspire them for next time. You’ll see, there are many ways to make healthy and moderate eating a habit, without putting your social life under pressure.

Another basic principle is much more difficult, but important as well: **avoid processed foods**. These are often full of sugars, fats, and salts in imbalanced proportions. This will be especially clear

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when you register them in your diary. If you have a very busy life, or you just don't enjoy cooking a healthy meal each day, try to look for recipes that you can make in bulk. Preferably, select meals you can freeze, as this will enable you to re-heat them on the busy days. Avoid "ready-to-serve" dishes from the store and make your own, avoiding excessive sugars and fats. In case of snacks, it's still best to use these opportunities to eat fresh food, and many options do not require any preparation (such as fruits and vegetables). In case you're not a morning person, prepare everything the night before so you're all set for the morning. If there's a fridge available at work, use it to stock some of your healthy food, so you won't end up buying unhealthy lunches at work on busy days.

And finally, **vary**. This last basic principle is the key to persevering for success. The best diets are the dietary habits that you can keep up for the rest of your life. Going on a strict diet is bound to fail as you can't maintain this, leading to a yo-yo effect (cycles of weight gain and loss). Variation is fun and easy to maintain, so don't hesitate to vary in your food and exercises.

A good tip for food variation are recipe boxes, well-balanced meals assembled in advance and delivered to your home. As such, you don't have to feel inspired to invent healthy meals or go grocery shopping, which reduces the risk to get distracted by

less healthier options. If you prefer a bit more freedom, opt for veggie boxes from a local farm. This will guarantee that you start each meal from vegetables and will increase the variety in your meals as many veggie boxes are seasonal. And on top of that, you support your local economy: extra bonus! If you're a picky eater, know that it takes around 15 times of trying to acquire a taste. Our taste buds are dynamic and can easily adapt. So keep trying; you may end up liking something a lot more later.

Of course, variation means also varying in seasoning: perhaps something isn't tasty when prepared the Italian way, but may be really tasty when prepared the Chinese way.

Don't be too hard on yourself; it is okay to enjoy less healthier foods once in a while. Take your calorie intake and burning into account and compensate that day by working out a bit more or eating extra healthy during the other meals. Don't be too strict, because that won't last either.

2. What does it mean to get adequate exercise?

Sufficient exercise may seem like a big deal to many of us. Yet, if you'd ask a prehistoric person to remain still in one spot for 8 hours straight, they would not understand. Sitting at a desk is not what we were meant to do as human beings. Our bodies were not designed to do that,

Varied diet: 5 basic principles

-  Drink sufficient water
-  Plan each meal around vegetables (min. 300 grams/day)
-  Eat in moderation
-  Avoid processed foods
-  A balanced diet: the key to perseverance

as evidenced by the increased health risks associated with a sedentary lifestyle. Regular exercise is necessary and keeps our bodies fit and healthy. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that you have to join a gym instantly or hire a personal trainer for the next few months. You can start by doing more exercises through changing small habits, such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator. You may also consider moving the printer further away or using the bathroom on a different floor to walk around a bit more. If you go to work by car, park a little bit further and walk the remaining distance. If you take public transport, consider getting off a stop earlier or later than your regular stop and walk the remaining distance. When doing household chores, put on a song that will make you dance, and you'll see that physical exercise is actually easier and more fun. There are many ways to move around more. If you need extra motivation, you can purchase an activity tracker, which allows you to see how many steps you take in one day. Maybe take it even a step further and ask your colleagues to join you for a walk or run during lunch break. However big or small your step towards exercise may be, the most important thing is to actually take the step.

3. What does it mean to be overweight and how is it dangerous?

A healthy diet and sufficient exercise are keys to fight being **overweight**, but what exactly does being overweight mean? It is a mistake to only take your weight (in kilograms or pounds) into account when talking about being overweight. It is important to take your height into account as well. A well-known index that considers both weight and height is called the body mass index (BMI). But clinicians and scientists lately agree that next to BMI, it is also important to look how fat is distributed over your body.

Actually, fat distribution may be more important, as abdominal fat is more

dangerous to your health than fat below your waist. Depending on the location, fat can be pro-inflammatory, which is the case for abdominal fat (often measured as the waist circumference). As such, a waist circumference of more than 80 cm for women or 94 cm for men is associated with poorer health. If the circumference exceeds 88 cm (women) or 102 cm (men), then the person's health is at greater risk. As such, people with an "apple shape" may suffer more than people with a "pear shape."

Although being overweight is something visual, skinny people may actually also be at danger. Here, we see a disturbed "fat profile" in the blood, meaning an imbalance between good and bad cholesterol (too low levels of the first and higher levels of the latter). So being skinny does not necessarily protect you. People with psoriasis are more prone to this imbalance and therefore face a higher risk of developing metabolic syndrome and cardiovascular diseases. Especially young people with psoriasis have a higher risk. Therefore, if you suffer from psoriasis, it is important to maintain a healthy lifestyle and regularly check your blood tests (cholesterol levels) and waist circumference.

4. How can stress be managed?

Stress is often associated with unhealthy effects. However, it is nearly impossible to never experience stress, so what is more important is how you cope with stress. If you don't know how to begin, start small. For example, write: what did you find stressful today and why? Perhaps you'll find a solution to the problem while writing it down. But stress can be overwhelming and difficult to cope with, so perhaps you should ask your clinician for advice. Stress is actually very normal and your body is designed to respond to it. However, the problem arises when stress turns into a chronic situation, continuously demanding your body to respond to it.

As psoriasis may stress you, or act as a reflection of how stressed you are, it is

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important to be able to cope with stress. Still, finding a way to cope with stress is not about finding one strategy; each stressful situation may require a different approach in coping. Should you experience difficulties in finding a coping strategy, do not hesitate to ask your clinician for advice or look for a course about stress management. Remember, a healthy mind exists at its best in in a healthy body.

5. Why is exposure to sunlight also important?

Exposure to sunlight is paramount both for people with psoriasis and for anyone. It is important for the production of vitamin D, which is essential for a healthy body and especially works well against psoriasis. However, our “sun-exposure behaviour” has dramatically changed during the previous century, as we stay a lot indoors but consider a tan attractive. Yet, the latter often comes with sunburns, increasing your risk of developing skin cancer. This is also true for tanning beds.

Understandably, the relationship between sunlight and psoriasis is somewhat complex: most people with psoriasis will benefit from sunlight as they see the *plaques* (temporarily) diminish. This is a result of sunlight suppressing the overactive immune system in psoriasis, and has given rise to *phototherapies* (light therapies) such as *ultraviolet (UV)-B* and *psoralen UV-A (PUVA)*. However, even with psoriasis, one must be wary of “too much light” regarding skin cancer. That’s why you need to track the amount of sun exposure and the number of light-therapy sessions you get. The latter will

be controlled by your clinician, but you are in charge of how much sun exposure you’re getting. Remember to wear sunscreen, even when you want to tan. You may also want to consider “self-tanners,” although the colour will possibly fade a bit quicker on the psoriatic lesion than on your healthy skin. Try it out first on a discrete lesion and see whether you’re comfortable with how it looks. However, know that the best tanning result is obtained by eating the right food; carrots are filled with beta-carotene, and will help darken your skin. And in fact, a study showed that a tanned skin through diet is considered more attractive than through sunlight or tanning beds.

6. Why is it important to avoid cigarettes and excessive alcohol consumption?

Both habits do not require any further introduction: they’re bad for your health. But for someone with psoriasis, tobacco and alcohol may negatively affect psoriasis, its treatments, and the development of comorbidities. If you find it difficult to quit smoking, or you’re not sure whether you consume too much alcohol, you should see your clinician who can help you quit. Should you stop smoking and drinking excessively today? Yes, as studies have shown that people with psoriasis may be more prone to addictions. So don’t hesitate any longer and try to get rid of these bad habits today. Should you need more motivation, remember that both tobacco and alcohol can be costly as well. Quitting may not only improve your health, but also your wallet! ■

