

38| NAN Foundation Brain Health Mini-Series: Nutrition

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Speakers: Ryan Van Patten, John Bellone



Intro Music 00:00



Ryan Van Patten 00:17

Welcome, everyone, to Navigating Neuropsychology: A voyage into the depths of the brain and behavior. I'm Ryan Van Patten...

John Bellone 00:24



...and I'm John Bellone. Today we have the third installment of the NAN Foundation's Brain Health Miniseries on the topic of nutrition. We have previously released episodes on sleep and physical activity, and this is going to be the last of these types of episodes for now. Again, these are targeted at the general public so we encourage neuropsychologists and trainees to share these episodes with their families and their patients. You can either do this by having them download these NavNeuro episodes or even easier you could give them the link to the NAN Foundation website, which has a page devoted to this miniseries. And this link could easily fit in a recommendation section of a report, where you're recommending healthy lifestyle changes. We'll also include this link in the show notes at navneuro.com/38.

Ryan Van Patten 01:14



So something else that we wanted to share with everyone is an upcoming conference that we're both really excited about, we think it'll be really great. This is the 25th Butters-Kaplan West Coast Neuropsychology conference.

John Bellone 01:28



[laughs] That's a mouthful.

Ryan Van Patten 01:29



Yeah. So this takes place in San Diego, March 19 to March 22. The theme of the conference is Advances in Pediatric Neuropsychology: Applications of Developmental Neuroscience.

John Bellone 01:42



They have a really good lineup of speakers.

Ryan Van Patten 01:44



Yeah, we won't mention any names, you should go to their website. They do have a lot of great speakers. So we encourage pediatric neuropsychologists, anyone interested in that field, to consider attending this conference. We will link to their website on our web page.

John Bellone 02:00



Again, navneuro.com/38. If you've enjoyed these episodes and the podcast in general, then we ask you to please take a few seconds to rate us on Apple

podcasts or on whatever platform you might be listening to this on. If other people see that the show is rated highly, then they're more likely to listen to it themselves and we want to get this out to as broad of an audience as we can, especially these brain health episodes. We really appreciate all of you who've already left a rating. We are so grateful. And now we bring you the NAN Foundation episode on nutrition.



Transition Music 02:31



Ryan Van Patten 02:35

Welcome to the NAN Foundation podcast, a brain health mini-series. We're your hosts Dr. Ryan Van Patten and Dr. John Bellone.



Transition Music 02:43



John Bellone 02:58

Hey Ryan, what do you think of when you hear the word "diet"?



Ryan Van Patten 03:01

To be honest, I actually cringe a little bit whenever I hear that word. I think we really misuse it a lot in our society. We talk about eating better in order to lose weight, to increase fitness, and to lead a healthier life. And then we talk about dieting, which might involve starving ourselves half to death and/or drastically changing what we eat all at once. This is just not the path to health. So when we use the word "diet" in today's episode, we are referring to lifestyle changes, not these abrupt, temporary shifts in eating habits.



John Bellone 03:35

Yeah, those fad diets and temporary fixes do not lead to sustainable improvements in health. When I think about nutrition, I think about the axioms, "garbage in, garbage out" or, you know, "you are what you eat". If we eat greasy, highly processed, high sugar food day in and day out, we are going to have lower energy. We will be irritable and moody. Our bodies will wear out a lot faster than if we are mindful about what we eat. On the other hand, if we take in nutritious food, we're going to notice the benefits both in the short-term and in the long-term. But before we move forward, I want to provide an important caveat to this episode. Nutrition is

a very difficult area to study. There are countless molecules and chemicals in the food that we eat, and they all interact in complex ways in our bodies. Our biologies also differ so each of us needs different amounts of nutrients, and we process food in unique ways.

Ryan Van Patten 04:35



For example, many of us have heard about the health benefits of antioxidants that we get from coffee, wine, and chocolate. But, like anything, we want to consume these things in moderation and each one contains many other chemicals that may help or harm us. All of this to say that nutrition science is never simple and we should be very skeptical of claims that a particular food or chemical is a panacea, or cure all. But, fortunately, there are some general trends in nutrition science that are very well supported by research. So we'll focus today's episode on those.

John Bellone 05:11



And we should say that most people understand that what we eat and drink affects our physical health and risk for medical conditions and events, like heart attacks, diabetes, cancers. But people may not know that our diet also has a big impact on our brain health and our risk for cognitive decline, for Alzheimer's disease and for other forms of dementia.

Ryan Van Patten 05:34



For sure. We are really fortunate to have a nutritional lifestyle choice that has been shown time and time again, by scientists, to be very healthy for both our brains and our bodies. It's called the Mediterranean diet. If you do your own research on this, you might also run across two other choices that are very similar. They are called the MIND and DASH diets. MIND and DASH are so close to the Mediterranean diet that, for the purpose of our episode today, we're going to consider them to be the same, and we'll just use the term Mediterranean diet for simplicity. So why don't you get us started, John. Why is it called the Mediterranean diet?

John Bellone 06:17



Yeah, well, interest in this lifestyle began in the 1960s when people started to notice that heart disease was significantly lower in many Mediterranean regions, like Italy and Greece, compared to other places. And we've continued to notice this pattern throughout the years. If you've heard of so-called Blue Zones, a select few places in the world where people live longer and healthier lives than other places, one of these is in Sardinia, Italy and another one is in Ikaria, Greece. Once researchers pinned down the food choices that were being made by people in these regions,

they began conducting studies to assess whether the food was contributing to their health.

Ryan Van Patten 06:59



And they really hit a gold mine. The Mediterranean diet has a host of positive health benefits. Most importantly, it improves both heart and brain functioning. As John mentioned, it reduces the risk of heart attack, stroke, Alzheimer's disease and dementia, obesity, diabetes, and other chronic health conditions as well. Time and time again, scientists have reported evidence supporting the health benefits of these food choices. And I want to emphasize here that the diet improves the functioning of both our bodies and our brains. Our brains require a lot of resources such as oxygen and glucose in order to function. Our brains also depend upon additional organ systems such as the respiratory, the lungs, and cardiovascular, the heart, those systems. Relevant to today's episode is the very accurate statement: "heart health is brain health". The heart and brain are really intimately connected. The heart provides the blood, and so the oxygen and nutrients that feed and clean the brain. So options that enhance the functioning of your heart, such as foods lower in cholesterol and salt, also enhance brain functioning and reduce your chances of future brain-related problems. So let's get into the weeds here. The Mediterranean diet is a great choice for our health. What does it look like?

John Bellone 08:28



Yeah, well, it's not rocket science and it is probably not that different from what many of our listeners have heard of in terms of healthy food intake. It is all about eating more fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, whole grains, olive oil, and fish, and eating less meat, especially red meat, and less refined sugar, like candy and ice cream.

Ryan Van Patten 08:51



Yeah, I have heard those recommendations a time or two before thinking back to the food pyramid when I was in elementary school. We'll also point out that you'll save significant money by making these changes as well, with shifts such as drinking water rather than soda, eating less meat and eating fewer calories overall. But importantly, here, what is it about these food choices, John, that will make us healthier?

John Bellone 09:18



Right, so, most people know that they should eat this way, but they might not know exactly why it's good for them. First off, if you adhere to this diet, you will naturally

eat fewer calories because these foods are not as dense as packaged foods or red meats. Fewer calories generally means less weight gain and reduced risk of obesity. Also less chance of getting diabetes and less chance of heart disease, all of which have been shown to prolong one's lifespan and overall health. Additionally, the Mediterranean diet is high in fiber, which is great for digestive and colon health. It's also high in vitamins and essential nutrients, some of which our bodies cannot produce on its own, and which we need for a host of important chemical processes. Replacing animal protein with plant protein, like beans and certain grain or nuts, has also been shown to help us live longer.

Ryan Van Patten 10:18



Yeah, one way that I think about adhering to the Mediterranean diet is to eat the fruits and vegetables, beans, nuts, and whole grains, as you said, and to look for those foods that have a variety of colors, textures, and tastes. We know that this means that they are diverse and rich in terms of vitamins and nutrients. And we also know that eating a wide array of different fruits and vegetables leads to a healthier microbiome. The microbiome are the microorganisms that live inside us and promote our health, the "good bacteria" so to speak.

John Bellone 10:56



Another way to think about making decisions about food is to look at the nutrition label and consider cutting anything that is especially high in saturated or trans fats. Also things that are high in cholesterol, sugar, or sodium, another word for salt.

Ryan Van Patten 11:12



Yeah, it's great that the USDA and FDA require those nutrition labels on our foods. Because we are fortunate to have the information at our fingertips, we really should be checking them at the grocery store.

John Bellone 11:25



Yeah, and the list of ingredients as well. So I can't tell you how many times I see high fructose corn syrup, or the dozens of other names for sugar, up near the top of that ingredient list for a food or beverage item. And I just cringe. I usually don't buy that item.

Ryan Van Patten 11:42



Just usually?



John Bellone 11:44

I'm not perfectly like you, Ryan. [laughs]



Ryan Van Patten 11:46

That's true. [laughs]



John Bellone 11:48

It's not that you can never eat those foods, but we should eat them rarely and in small portions.



Ryan Van Patten 11:56

So now that we've talked about what to eat and why it is good for us, let's briefly touch on the how. So how can we go about improving our nutritional intake and moving a little bit closer to a Mediterranean diet? As John had said, although the more you adhere to the diet the better, it is certainly not all or nothing. So you don't have to become a full fledged vegan in order to derive benefits from the food you eat. In fact, research shows that even small improvements in adherence to a Mediterranean diet have important health benefits such as a reduction in the chance of future dementia. In other words, two salads per week is better than one. [laughs]



John Bellone 12:36

Right. Yeah, and again, keep in mind that we don't mean diet in the sense of overhauling what you eat overnight. Lifestyle changes tend to be much more enduring if these involve small changes over time. Changes that you can stick with and that you can maintain for decades. For example, you can choose not to eat meat for one day per week and replace it with a vegetarian meal. You can drink one fewer soda per week and replace it with water. You can have friends over and all prepare a meal together rather than meeting at a restaurant. You can also prepare to eat healthy by keeping junk food out of your house, by bringing healthy foods on trips with you - like putting a bag of carrots together before you head off on the road - setting aside an appropriate portion size before you start eating, and by choosing not to go to the grocery store when you're hungry.



Ryan Van Patten 13:31

Yeah, if we shop while hungry, we're much more likely to make poor food choices, right?

John Bellone 13:36



Yeah, exactly. You should also stick to your grocery list and make fast food off limits for yourself, even while you're traveling. Try to eat slowly. Prepare more meals at home. You know, my wife and I cook extra every night and have the rest for lunch the next day, or sometimes we make bigger meals on the weekends to have leftovers during the week and this also saves us time. And this way we can control everything that goes into the dishes - there's no extra salt or sugar or butter like there might be in a restaurant. And, on top of that, just being healthier overall saves a lot of money as well.

Ryan Van Patten 14:16



It's funny that you said "my wife and I". You know, I've been to your place for dinner many times and I've never once seen anyone other than Raquel make dinner.

John Bellone 14:25



I can cook, I promise you. [laughs]

Ryan Van Patten 14:28



Microwave. [laughs]

John Bellone 14:30



That counts. [laughs]

Ryan Van Patten 14:32



So you can also control your portion sizes by using smaller plates, by eating slowly, by eating mindfully - meaning paying attention to the taste and texture of what you're eating - and also by ending the meal when you're about three quarters of the way full. Also replace salt and sugar with pepper and spices for the flavor. You'll really be surprised by how quickly your palate adjusts to the shift.

John Bellone 14:58



One more thing that I'd like to mention. There are a lot of fad diets and supplements out there - we won't name names, but they know who they are. The issue with fad diets and supplements is that we generally don't know how healthy they are for us. There is usually little to no solid evidence or research on the health effects of these supplements and fads. Certainly way less evidence compared to the Mediterranean diet. In fact, they are often created for monetary profit or for selling books, not with the primary motivation of helping people. In contrast, as I mentioned at the

beginning, the Mediterranean diet developed naturally in groups of people who then live longer, healthier lives as a result. Because the Mediterranean diet has so much scientific support, you really cannot go wrong here.

Ryan Van Patten 15:54



I cannot agree more. And remember that we can modify our nutritional intake for the better at any point in our lives, it's never too late. That said, a great deal of our food-related behavior, similar to other behavior, is learned in childhood. So if you expose your children or grandchildren to a healthy Mediterranean diet early on, you'll likely promote good habits that they'll take with them for the rest of their lives.

John Bellone 16:21



Before we end today, let's provide three actionable steps that we can take in order to move closer to a Mediterranean diet and thus improve our overall health and reduce our risk of cognitive decline. First, just eat more plant-based foods. A variety of colorful fruits, vegetables, nuts, beans, grains, and overall fewer meat products, packaged foods, and sugary foods. Second, reduce the amount of extra salt and sugar and butter that you add to your food, adding pepper or spices for flavor instead. And third, drink water instead of soda or other sugary drinks.

Ryan Van Patten 17:09



Well, that's all for today. Thanks so much for listening, and join us next time as we continue to promote neuro-wellness through education.



Exit Music 17:18

John Bellone 17:39



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Ryan Van Patten 17:49



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