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HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

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BANANA BUST by Ann Gerhardt, MD (04/2006)

A number of people have asked me to comment on a circulating email that touts the benefits of bananas. The email proves that the Internet has its share of mis-information and all that is written is not true. It is almost not worth refuting, but in so doing, I can impart some good nutrition information. The email claims are in italics and the debunking is in non-italics.

Exercise: Containing three natural sugars - sucrose, fructose and glucose combined with fiber, banana gives an instant and substantial energy boost.

Research has proven that just two bananas provide enough energy for a strenuous 90-minute workout.

Only if 'strenuous' consists of mild office work. Two bananas supply 210 calories, perhaps enough for a tiny, non-muscular person's 90 minute workout, but not for most people. Athletes like bananas because they are quick, relatively healthy, sources of sugar. Sugar maintains blood sugar levels, but the major energy source for the workout is body fat.

Depression: According to a recent survey undertaken by MIND amongst people suffering from depression, many felt much better after eating a banana. This is because bananas contain tryptophan, a type of protein that the body converts into serotonin, known to make you relax, improve your mood and make you feel happier.

Wrong, on two counts. Bananas contain very little tryptophan (an amino acid building block of protein), so they can't raise tryptophan levels directly. We know that people feel better after eating sugar and banana has plenty of sugar. Dietary sugar prevents blood tryptophan from being taken up by muscle cells, allowing more of it to enter the brain and be turned into serotonin. Bananas do contain pre-formed serotonin (5-hydroxytryptamine), which may be calming, but corn, rice, barley and ginger, which all contain at least three times as much, should work much better. Try chocolate instead.

PMS: Forget the pills -- eat a banana. The vitamin B6 it contains regulates blood glucose levels, which can affect your mood.

Bananas are a rich source of vitamin B6, but B6 has nothing to do with glucose metabolism and blood glucose has nothing to do with preventing PMS. Large doses of B6 (500 mg) have been successful in alleviating PMS symptoms, but cause nervous system toxicity. A banana has only 0.66 mg. Try exercise instead.

Anemia: High in iron, bananas can stimulate the production of hemoglobin in the blood and so helps in cases of anemia.

At 1/3rd of a mg of iron per banana (1/54th of the daily requirement), bananas are not high in iron. The significant vitamin B6 content, though, might help anemia, as a requisite for hemoglobin production.

Blood Pressure: This unique tropical fruit is extremely high in potassium yet low in salt, making it the perfect way to beat blood pressure.

High potassium foods DO help blood pressure and bananas are a good source. *Per calorie*, though, they provide only ~ 4.5 mg potassium. Compare the per-calorie potassium of other fruits -dried apricots (5.8 mg), cantaloupe and most melons (over 8 mg), guava (5.6 mg), kiwi (5.5 mg), loquats (5.7) and papaya (6.6 mg). They all **pale compared to a tomato**, with 10.5 mg potassium per calorie. Since there are other choices, you don't have to eat large numbers of calories from bananas to stock up on potassium.

Brain Power: 200 students at a Twickenham (Middlesex) school were helped through their exams this year by eating bananas at breakfast, break, and lunch in a bid to boost their brain power. Research has shown that the potassium-packed fruit can assist learning by making pupils more alert.

Many studies show that eating ANY food for breakfast improves scholastic performance. Three bananas a day!! Kids need the nutrition that comes with variety.

Constipation: High in fiber, including bananas in the diet can help restore normal bowel action.

Many people tell me they eat a banana to plug them up when they have loose stools, not the opposite. Bananas contain only moderate fiber - a medium sized banana contains 2.7 grams. A cup of most types of berries (with a third the calories) has at least twice that. An ideal daily fiber intake is more than 20 grams. A mere 2.7 grams is not going to make the difference between misery and smooth sailing.

Hangovers: One of the quickest ways of curing a hangover is to make a banana milkshake, sweetened with honey. The banana calms the stomach and, with the help of the honey, builds up depleted blood sugar

levels, while the milk soothes and re-hydrates your system.

I'm not an expert on hangovers, but drunks tell me that milk and a banana aren't the solution. The symptoms of hangover are due to build-up of acetaldehyde, a metabolic product of alcohol, and bananas don't change that.

Heartburn & Ulcers: Bananas have a natural antacid effect in the body, so if you suffer from heartburn, try eating a banana for soothing relief. The banana is used as a food for intestinal disorders because of its soft texture and smooth-ness. It is the only raw fruit that can be eaten without distress in chronic ulcer cases. It neutralizes over-acidity and coats the stomach.

Eating food to buffer acid and coat the stomach helps heartburn and ulcer symptoms but leads to weight gain. Overfilling the stomach will aggravate heartburn. It is much better treat the underlying acid or bacteria problem with specific therapy – Don't just placate symptoms by boosting Chiquita sales.

Morning Sickness: Snacking on bananas between meals helps to keep blood sugar levels up and avoid morning sickness.

Morning sickness is not due to low blood sugar. Eating multiple bananas a day, as snacks, will help gain the 25-30 pounds of pregnancy quickly.

Mosquito bites: Before reaching for the insect bite cream, try rubbing the affected area with the inside of a banana skin.

Have at it. Let me know if it works.

Stress: Bananas are high in B vitamins that help calm the nervous system.

B vitamins only calm the nerves if you have a deficiency. Except for the previously discussed B6, banana provides no more than a tenth of the RDA for any of the B vitamins.

Overweight and at work? Studies find that pressure at work leads to gorging on comfort food. Of 5000 hospital patients, the most obese were more likely to be in high-pressure jobs. The report concluded that, to avoid panic-induced food cravings, control blood sugar levels by snacking on high carbohydrate foods every two hours.

Eating every 2 hours prevents hunger-induced gorging, not stress over-eating. Eating a banana or any carbohydrate food every two hours IS stress eating and will cause weight gain. Bananas will not stop stress eating, but they're better than chips.

Temperature control: Many other cultures see

bananas as a "cooling" fruit that can lower both the physical and emotional temperature of expectant mothers and their babies.

Whatever makes you happy. Have some melon.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): Bananas can help SAD sufferers because they contain the natural mood enhancer tryptophan.

See Depression. The author must be confusing tryptophan with 5-hydroxy-tryptamine. See DrG'sMediSense issue 1-4 for the appropriate treatment for SAD.

Smoking: Bananas can also help people trying to give up smoking. The B6 & B12 they contain, as well as the potassium and magnesium, help the body recover from nicotine withdrawal.

Banana contains no B12 and only one-tenth the day's requirement for magnesium. The nutrients are irrelevant, however, since they do not help with nicotine withdrawal. Try the patch.

Stress: Potassium is a vital mineral, which helps normalize the heartbeat, sends oxygen to the brain and regulates your body's water balance. When we are stressed, our metabolic rate rises, thereby reducing our potassium levels. These can be rebalanced with the help of a banana snack.

Everything in that passage is incorrect, except for potassium being a vital mineral that maintains a regular heart rate. Potassium doesn't reduce stress. Take a vacation.

Strokes: According to research in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, eating bananas as part of a regular diet can cut the risk of death by strokes by as much as 40%!

This has to be misquoted. NOTHING except good blood pressure control, cuts stroke risk that much.

Down with apples: So maybe its time to change that well-known phrase so that we say, "A banana a day keeps the doctor away!"

Every fruit has its benefits and none should be eaten exclusively or in excess. If you need the extra calories eat more fruits each day, including a banana.

Vive variety!!!