

Nutrition Notes

These notes are based on Adrian March's background in advising sports enthusiasts and sports coaches on the principles of healthy eating, and his own experience of the differences which a colostomy can make.

The new colostomate needs to understand that there is no logic in the likes and dislikes of a colon, once it has been invited to deliver its output via a stoma. In the first few weeks after a colostomy, it is probable that it will principally be dislikes which are evident, and Adrian has memories of the six weeks during which he couldn't face drinking red wine, but fortunately this somewhat extreme phase will pass. However, some residual heightened sensitivities may remain, and it is as well to be aware of the possible surprises which may result. These are most likely to relate to foods like mild curries which now have a disproportionately strong effect, or even a single highly spiced nibble consumed with a drink, which might upset digestion for several days. The colostomate must be prepared to learn from experiment, which should include sampling new flavours in small quantities until they have been found to be tolerated.

Another effect which is seldom noticed by those with conventional waste disposal arrangements is the consequence of taking oral antibiotics, and the resultant devastation of the bacteria of the gut, on which our normal digestive processes depend. This is usually all too evident to a colostomate, who will find that a few probiotic yogurts will soon restore normal performance. Actimel has been found to be useful in this context.

While cod liver oil has for generations been considered an excellent supplement, and has been recommended for older people to improve joint performance, there have been concerns recently that it can suffer from heavy metal contamination, and alternative fish oils have found favour. It is also worth noting that a 1000mg fish oil capsule taken daily can often improve the efficiency of irrigation.

While on the subject of irrigation, the necessity for adequate hydration should also be mentioned. This is a subject often overlooked in the summer or particularly when on holiday in hot countries, when erratic performance by the stoma is blamed on unaccustomed food. It is not always easy to ensure that one drinks the recommended two litres a day, but even this may not be enough under very hot conditions or when taking vigorous exercise. It is perhaps easier to remember that when you feel thirsty you are already partially dehydrated, so have a reasonable drink, not just a sip. If you wake up in the night feeling thirsty, drink half a glass: six gulps, if you don't want to turn on the light. Remember also that cold drinks are absorbed more slowly than those at room temperature, so try to avoid taking drinks from the chiller; if you need to liven it up a little, add some unsweetened lemon juice.

Should you become seriously dehydrated, perhaps from an attack of diarrhoea, there is no need for proprietary rehydration drinks: a teaspoonful of sugar and a pinch of salt in a litre of water is perfectly adequate.

When choosing vegetables, aim for a variety of colours. The predominant colour grouping is red, orange-yellow, green and blue-purple; each group holds a set of beneficial phyto-nutrients. Carrots are extremely rich in beta carotene, a powerful antioxidant which is found particularly in the orange colour. Purple vegetables contain pigments called anthocyanins, which are also antioxidants. Antioxidants are substances that tend to protect cells and their DNA from the damage caused by unstable molecules known as free radicals. As a rule, the more colourful the vegetable, the more antioxidant nutrients are likely to be present, and in general, the stronger the colour the better.

Other anti-oxidants are to be found in fruit: particularly cranberries, blueberries, blackberries and grapes. Try blueberries and Greek yogurt as an enjoyable and health-giving dessert.