

You can't rebuild without the right raw materials

By FUAD AL QUDSI

IF YOU'RE scheduled for a surgical procedure, with all of the stress that comes with it, what you're eating and drinking is probably the last thing on your mind. However, having adequate nutrition both before and after surgery is vital to a shorter hospital stay, faster recovery, and overall better quality of life.

Of course, you should consult with your doctor to ensure you're following all the nutritional guidelines your specific procedure calls for. Surgeries vary widely, and some procedures require more specific guidelines and protocols than others. Some are low-risk outpatient surgeries that will have you in and out up and around within a day or two, but others are more complicated, with weeks or even months of recovery time. That said, there are common nutritional strategies that anyone undergoing surgery can benefit from.

Carbohydrates are necessary

Prior to surgery, most patients are urged to fast for a set period — usually from eight to 12 hours — because having food in the system can increase the risk of complications. However, fasting for longer than recommended can hinder a smooth recovery because it throws your insulin levels out of whack, which leaves your body less nourished post-op than it should be.

That's why the last meal before you begin your fast should be rich in carbohydrates. Research shows that loading up on carbs before surgery reduces hunger, thirst and anxiety, and lowers the chances of experiencing nausea, vomiting and a longer hospital stay after surgery. Some foods to consider are:

- Whole grain pasta, bread and brown rice
- Bagels and cereals
- Fruit juice

- Oatmeal and grits
- Dairy products

Adequate protein is vital

Even more important than carbohydrates is protein. In fact, when it comes to recovery, it's the most important nutrient, especially in older people, because the body experiences a great deal of inflammation in response to the trauma of surgery. While this is necessary for healing, one consequence is that the body responds by breaking down muscle tissue.

This muscle loss can drastically slow recovery, result in longer hospital stays and hinder rehabilitation. In addition, proteins make up the antibodies in the immune system that fight off infection. Therefore, the risk of infection after surgery increases with inadequate protein intake. Some examples are:

- Lean meats such as chicken, turkey and fish
- Nonfat dairy products
- Whey protein shakes and supplements

Focus on anti-inflammatory foods

As mentioned, the body goes through a lot of "good" inflammation after surgery, but too much can cause complications, including infections and low energy. If you have open wounds following your procedure, consuming anti-inflammatory foods to help the healing process is important. Focus on foods rich in vitamin C, zinc and phytonutrients from plants, all of which play a role in boosting the immune system, repairing damaged tissue and building new tissue. If the surgery involves broken bones, foods rich in calcium and vitamin D help the healing process as well. Examples include:

- Berries
- Citrus fruits, like oranges
- Bell peppers
- Leafy green vegetables
- Nuts and seeds
- Beans and peas

Getting enough calories

In spite of the fasting that's required before surgery and the nausea that often follows procedures, consuming ade-



quate calories is crucial to healing. Even if you are temporarily immobilized, your body is burning a lot of calories with the energy it takes to heal itself and fight off infection. If you do not replace these calories, you'll continue to feel sick and recovery time will be extended.

Post-op nausea could last for up to a week, so consider making calorie-dense smoothies with nut butters, avocado and fruits and vegetables to make sure you're getting calories and nutrients quickly. Nutritional shakes such as Ensure and Boost are also recommended. By consuming the nutrients mentioned earlier in this article, along with adequate calories every day, you will find yourself in good shape.

The bottom line

A surgical procedure can be scary and the recovery pro-

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Fuad Al Qudsi



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labrum, the rubbery tissue at the rim of the shoulder joint which keeps the ball in the socket, and lines the hip socket, where the head of the femur, or thighbone, rests.

He explained, “When I have a patient with moderate arthritis or ligament tears, rather than performing surgery, I can use healthy cells from their own body to stimulate healing. The range of response varies, but is significant.” He said he uses “liposuction aspirates,” which means he extracts the patient’s fat stem cells and then re-injects them where they’re needed to stimulate the repair of arthritic cartilage and bone.

Minimally invasive

Not a lot of doctors are doing this kind of restorative work, said Gularte, but his confidence comes from the results he’s seen.



Dr. Gularte and his family enjoying the local scenery.

“I learned about this approach when working with a rheumatologist in Scottsdale,” he said. “He had patients for whom no other treatments had worked. As I worked with him, he shared amazing stories about people for whom the regenerative procedure was life-changing.”

Gularte’s expertise in regenerative medicine is supported by his training in fluoroscopy — imaging that shows a continuous X-ray on a monitor — which enables him to determine the exact location into which he will make an injection.

“Injectable therapy is a nonoperative, minimally invasive technique,” said Gularte. “It helps musculoskeletal injuries — damage to bones, cartilage, ligaments, tendons and connective tissues — heal faster, thereby improving function, and quality of life.”

Gularte’s injectable therapies include introducing platelet-rich plasma to the injured site by using ultra-concentrated blood platelets, five to 10 times what you’d normally find in blood. The platelets are injected only in areas of the body which typically have poor blood supply, such as tendons, ligaments and the meniscus cartilage in the knee.

“These concentrated platelets send a signal to the body to stimulate an area to regenerate. This is an alert that this area needs more attention,” he said. “When I direct platelets into an area that has damage, I am telling the blood supply to recruit more energy to heal that area. The body always tries to heal itself. I’m trying to give it a push to do so.”

Surgical repair

This works best with tennis elbow or a torn meniscus, Gularte said. But it won’t work when the tear is extensive, or the patient needs a knee or shoulder replacement.

“If a patient has a massive meniscal tear, a surgeon will go in and repair it,” he said. “When we can do regenerative intervention alongside that surgery to support healing, the outcome is better. It’s not an either/or — surgical or regenerative intervention. It’s very much on a case-by-case basis, and finding what’s going to be the best solution to improve function.”

Gularte’s process involves investigating the source of pain by using imagery like an MRI. Then he can inject tissue directly into the injured site to encourage pain relief and stimulate healing.

“Residual pain is an indication of inflammation,” he said. “Our goal is to improve the body’s ability to heal that area. Pain is very complicated. We don’t always know why certain inflammation causes so much pain, but by in-

jecting the body’s own healing factor — platelet-rich plasma — we can stimulate a positive healing response.”

Gularte said his medical practice has never been busier, and he believes this is because patients who need help have begun to learn about regenerative therapy.

“I treat everyone with any kind of pain in the body, from migraines to joint pain to nerve pain,” he said. “At Monterey Spine & Joint, we are all interventional spine and joint practitioners, but there are different ways to treat the issues. Some of us are more focused on regenerative treatments.”

When not on the job, Gularte turns his attention to his wife, Nadira, and their two young daughters.

“My girls are the light of my life,” he said. “We spend a lot of time at the ballet studio, which I don’t mind. I was ‘Fritz’ in The Nutcracker, myself, as a kid in Salinas. I still love to dance. I also like to hike, trail-run, and kayak in this paradise we call home.”



Dr. Nicholas Gularte

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cess can be challenging, but with adequate nutrition, the experience can be less difficult. Keep in mind that some of the recommended foods mentioned may not interact favorably with medications you may be prescribed and certain procedures, like bariatric surgery, require very specific nutritional guidelines that shouldn’t be deviated from. When in doubt, ask your physician for referral to a registered dietitian for more personalized guidance.

Fuad Al Qudsi is a registered dietitian nutritionist in Carmel. Contact him at fuadfit.com.

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