

Wonder

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Title: **Nourishing Our Bodies During Great Lent** Author: **Chris Masterjohn**

The body makes a good servant, but a poor master. When we fast from certain foods during Lent, we assert our control over our body as well as our obedience to God. This does not mean, however, that we neglect our bodily health during this time, any more than we would want God to neglect our needs when we offer ourselves to Him as servants. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and we must therefore treat them with honor and respect, providing them with what is nourishing and healthful.

Eating healthfully in today's world is a challenge. We are often crammed for time, and turn out of necessity to pre-packaged, processed convenience foods rather than home-cooked meals. Because of our affluence, we have an abundance of refined foods right at our fingertips, foods that pack in the taste but not necessarily the nutrients. Eating in college campus dining halls adds another layer of difficulty, as our choices are limited to whatever is served. As a result, we Orthodox Christians have a continuous tradition spanning many centuries about what we *don't* eat during Lent, but we have lost much of our traditions about what we *do* eat during Lent. Eating healthfully during this season therefore requires special attention and care.

If we keep the fast strictly and eliminate meat, fish, dairy, and eggs, we cut out important sources of nutrients such as zinc, vitamin B₁₂, vitamin B₆, choline, calcium, and the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, and K. We therefore cannot just continue eating the same foods we always do without making up for these nutrients somehow – eating the hamburger bun and pickle *sans* beef just isn't going to cut it. Here, then, are a few tips for how to eat a well-rounded, nutritious diet during the Lenten season:

- **Shellfish.** Shellfish are among the few animal foods allowed during Lent, and are jam-packed with valuable nutrients. It would take just over a quarter pound of beef per day to meet the RDA for zinc, yet only a single serving of oysters per week. Similarly, one would have to eat two servings of salmon per week to obtain the RDA for vitamin B₁₂, but only one serving of clams per month. Choosing from a wide variety of shellfish several times per week would help ensure a sufficient intake of nutrients that are otherwise difficult to obtain in abundance without eating meat and fish on a daily basis.
- **Bananas.** Bananas are best known for their rich content of potassium, but bananas are also a great source of vitamin B₆. Eating a wide variety of unrefined plant foods will indeed provide a decent amount of B₆, but plant foods generally contain less than animal foods and what they do contain is less absorbable. Bananas, however, contain lots of B₆ in a highly absorbable form.
- **Spinach.** Spinach is an abundant source of betaine, a nutrient that can substitute for choline. Choline is especially important for brain and liver function, and our best sources are liver and egg yolks. Since these are not allowed during the fast, spinach is an excellent replacement.

- **Cruciferous Vegetables.** These include broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, collard greens, kale, kohlrabi, mustard, rutabaga, turnip, and bok choy. Crucifers are rich in calcium, and unlike other leafy greens such as spinach, the calcium is highly absorbable. Crucifers therefore represent an excellent substitute for milk. They are also a great source of vitamin K. Vitamin K comes in two forms: vitamin K₁, found in dark greens, and vitamin K₂, found in animal products and fermented foods like sauerkraut, kimchi, and traditional Asian forms of fermented soy. Ideally we would consume a mix of both forms, but crucifers and other dark greens are by far the Lenten sources of vitamin K most easily obtained in the dining hall.
- **Colorful Fruits and Vegetables.** Animal products are the only true source of vitamin A, but many plant foods contain beta-carotene and other similar compounds that our bodies can convert into vitamin A. The carotenes in most plant foods are poorly absorbable and the best plant-based source of vitamin A would actually be red palm oil. However, your best bet in a college dining hall would be that beautiful spectrum of reds, yellows, oranges, and greens. Fruits and veggies bearing these colors will provide plenty of carotenes that our bodies can use to make vitamin A. They also contain vitamin C and many other nutrients too long to list.
- **Avoid Refined Foods.** Refined foods like white sugar and white flour are low in nutrients and displace the nutrient-dense foods we should be eating instead. Opt for whole grains instead of white flour. Even still, whole grains are very nutritious but also contain some anti-nutrients that could increase our need for calcium and zinc. We should therefore eat a broad-based diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and non-grain starches without relying excessively on any one food group.
- **Cut Out the Fake Foods.** Soy may provide some valuable nutrients, but it is also rich in plant-based hormones called *phytoestrogens*. Eat traditional soy foods – miso, soy sauce, tempeh, and tofu – in moderation, and beware of loading up on the fake meats, which isn't really consistent with the spirit of the fast anyway.
- **Get Plenty of Sunshine.** Vitamin D is often called the “sunshine vitamin.” Getting plenty of vitamin D will reduce our need for calcium, and may have many other benefits as well. Spending time outside and getting plenty of fresh air and sunshine will help boost our vitamin D status.

These recommendations should be seen as loose guidelines rather than hard and fast rules. If you are allergic to some of these foods, don't digest them well, or feel better without them, you should listen to your body. But let us eat in a spirit of mindful respect for our body, and in a spirit of thanksgiving and joy.

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