

# Traditional diet provides healthy nutrition

By SHIRLEY M. KENDAL

*Nutrition: The science of balanced diet to promote health in human beings.*

I was more than impressed with what scientists have been able to do in this field. They have been able to figure out what nutrients are important to our bodies and not only what the food sources are, but also the amounts of nutrients we need every day to be healthy. This was presented as the Basic Four food groups (meat, milk, vegetables and fruit, and bread and cereal), a unique and simple plan that can be followed easily with little instruction.

How then did my parents and ancestors stay so healthy without a pattern like this to follow? I was raised on traditional foods and was very familiar with the type of foods used by my tribe and I became very curious.

I put myself to work on the task of dividing the traditional foods of my tribe into the Basic Four food groups. Frustrations! It did not work! I could stretch some of the foods to fit into the Basic Four plan, but there were very large

gaps, and the meat section was overloaded.

I abandoned the plan and decided to look at the nutrients needed under each food group. What nutrient did the scientists say was important in each category and what is the food source?

## Meat and Meat Substitutes

The meat and meat substitutes category supplies protein, thiamin, niacin and iron. Meat was our staple and

bone on it to get the marrow out. The marrow is an excellent source of iron.

The fish were stewed with the heads on, or baked. When we caught a large halibut, the meat was cut into thin strips and smoked and dried, the back of the halibut, because of all the meat on it, is also smoked and dried and cooked for a stew later. These are but a few examples, but it is obvious that because of all these things people did, they could easily



was in ample supply, so we did not need meat substitutes. The meat from the land animals was smoked, dried and preserved. The bones were cracked and stewed and the children were encouraged to eat the bone marrow.

We used to go to the dinner table with a fresh piece of wood, so we could pound the

meat the daily requirement.

## Milk and Milk Products

Milk and milk products yield an important nutrient, calcium. Traditionally in my culture, milk was reserved for infants and toddlers. After a child was weaned, milk was not available from any other source. But it was the practice of the Natives to cook all the bones with the meats and fish. We were encouraged to chew all the little bones, which are high in calcium content.

Shellfish, another source of calcium, was used in large amounts throughout the year. The Natives also did a very important thing: they added seal oil to all fish soups, dried fish was dipped into seal oil and the oil was added to fish if it was baked or prepared in any other way.

I feel this is important because seal oil contains Vitamin D. Vitamin D today is added to milk because it regulates the use of calcium and phosphorous by your body.

It was also the practice of the Tlingits to use seal fat as a pacifier for infants. This was a source of Vitamin D. Scientists also say the human body has the tendency to absorb all available calcium if there is strong need for it. From the pictures taken of the Natives in the early days, there didn't appear to be a problem with rickets, or other bone deformities caused by lack of calcium in the diet.

## Fruits and Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables were traditionally rare. I could name on one hand the number of plants available, and then they were available only in the spring.

Vitamins A and C are named as the important nutrients needed. The Vitamin C food source for the Natives was, of course, berries. We have access to a tremendous variety and amount of berries that were gathered and preserved for the winter. But then the scientist also tells me that Vitamin C is very fragile and is needed every day.

The enemies of Vitamin C are air, water and heat. Since the berries were usually eaten uncooked, that didn't appear to be a real problem. My ancestors were one step ahead of the scientist in saving this important vitamin; they preserved their berries in oil and keep them out in the cold.

They served the berries with some of the oil, and if water was added before serving the juice was also used.

Vitamin A not only comes from green and yellow vegetables, but from some meat sources and egg yolks. Salmon and salmon eggs, wild eggs and the yellow berries contain this important vitamin, which is present even after cooking and drying the foods.

The organ meats also contain Vitamin A, and the seal blubber, seal oil and animal livers are sources. The contents of the rumen in the deer family was usually dumped, but the stomach lining was eaten, and since it was not usually scrubbed and bleached as is the type you see in the market, the Vitamin A was not wasted.

In the spring we spent hours in the nearby woods eating all the sprouts that we could get and we gathered other plants as they became available.

## Grain Products

Traditionally, we had no food that could fit into the grain products category. But what is it that we need from this type of foods? These furnish B-Vitamins, especially thiamin and niacin and iron.

I looked at some lists of nutrients sources. There is a strong indication that we were able to meet this need because we ate almost all parts of the animal.

In addition, sea mammals such as seal have far more iron in their meat than land animals. These foods supplied us with the B-Vitamins and iron we needed to stay healthy. Shirley Kendall is a Tlingit home economist.