



Fit Family

Holistic nutritionist Ally van de Pol guides Carolynne Dear towards a greener (and leaner) lifestyle



The road to Ally van de Pol's place is steep and winding and the views are magnificent. As befits an holistic nutritionist and firm supporter of the plant-based-diet movement, her studio and gym sit nestled in the thick jungle of Sai Kung's hills, just off the MacLehose trail, and boast a fine veggie garden of their own. I'm in a green frame of mind before I even knock on her door.

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A keen athlete since her schooldays, van de Pol has always had an interest in wellness. But the lure of university parties, followed by a brief career in marketing and then a move to Hong Kong, saw her eating and drinking too much and overtraining to compensate.

A health scare and a number of running injuries prompted a lifestyle overhaul, and with a clutch of new fitness and nutrition qualifications, she launched

Dragon Fitness and Coaching two years ago. She now runs personal training and nutrition workshops from her gym and studio in the wilds of Sai Kung.

As for me, I'm fed up with carrying around a few surplus kilos and feel my body isn't responding to diet and lifestyle as it used to. No longer will a couple of days of crackers and cottage cheese shift the fat (an old university trick), and too much alcohol before bed has me

up all night rather than comatose. And hangover-free mornings after? Forget it.

So basically I'm in a rut, fed up with counting calories, and could do with encouraging the kids towards a healthier lifestyle as well. I think it sounds like a tall order, but van de Pol takes it all in her stride.

Kids' nutrition, she says, is hugely important to her. "I would love to be able to get in at school level with some of my classes – the younger that children get on board, the better. Their relationship with food by age 20 is indicative of how they will live their adult life, so they really don't want to be overweight and making bad choices in childhood. Healthy habits now will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives."

We run through the weekly family menu. It's a predictable mix of Western-style nursery dishes (think spaghetti bolognese, lasagne, cottage pie and so on), roast dinners, cheese-based pasta dishes, chicken noodle soups and dumplings, ribs or chops and veggies. Breakfast is cereal, and lunch is usually sandwiches or cold pasta salads and muesli bars. I lost my inspiration for school lunches sometime after the last opium war. As for myself, I fall back on toast most mornings, with the odd boiled egg thrown in for good measure, and a sandwich or "light salad" for lunch (usually at my desk). By 3pm I'm cracking open the chocolate Hobnobs.

"It's not terrible," says van de Pol. "But there are definitely improvements to



Healthy alternatives

be made." The biggest stumbling block seems to be the family breakfast. Over the years I've tried to limit the cereal choices to Weetabix and Special K, but Smyth is vehemently anti-cereal and anti-dairy.

"There is nothing nutritious in a box of cereal; those flakes are laden with sugar and the nutrients aren't naturally found, they're added in."

And she admits she gave up dairy a long time ago in favour of nut- or oat-based milk drinks. She argues that while dairy milk is brilliant for raising baby cows, it contains far too much protein to be useful for humans. Human breast milk – perfectly formulated for human babies – contains around 5% protein, and cows' milk – perfect for growing heifers – has about 25%. That means our kidneys are overloaded trying to process the

excess protein.

The list of breakfast alternatives runs to omelettes, eggs and spinach, porridge ("add raw cacao powder for a healthy chocolate hit if the kids need enticing"), chia pudding or a simple serve of fruit.

Van de Pol's hack for lunches and snacks is to over-cater the night before so there are always plenty of leftovers, and then to keep a big bowl of mixed salad and a fruit salad permanently topped up in the fridge.

"Leave the dressing in a separate jar so the salad doesn't go soggy, then whatever you're having for lunch – an omelette, or leftover roast chicken from last night – grab a plateful of ready-made salad to go with it." She suggests adding nuts, seeds, grains, chickpeas, beans or some avocado to bulk it up. And she recommends kale or bok choy as a more nutritious alternative to salad leaves.

A pre-made fruit salad makes it easier to opt for a healthy snack mid-afternoon rather than making a beeline for the biscuit tin. "Add coconut cream, honey, a sprinkle of cinnamon – I probably have about four or five serves of fruit a day. Don't be scared of it; the natural sugar is balanced with a heap of goodness, including vitamins and fibre."

Other snack ideas include sliced apple with peanut butter, a handful of nuts, hummus and veggie sticks, or raw balls (see recipe overleaf). "Have it in the fridge, all ready to go. Don't go hungry," she urges.

As for dinner, keep your plate topped up with veggies or salad. "The ratio should be around three quarters vegetables to one quarter meat or protein. Carbs are also good, but stick to wholegrain rice, potatoes (there's nothing wrong with a potato – it's low in calories

Van de Pol's tips for success

Boost your brekkie – try smoothies with fruit, spinach and nut milk; porridge and fruit, or eggs with veggies.

Half and half – fill your plate with half to two thirds veggies and make these guys the star, rather than meat. Veggies contain myriad phytonutrients and are low in calories and high in resistant starch (fibre).

Fabulous fruit – fruits bring so many nutrients to the table. They're easily digested and nobody ever got fat from eating them because fructose does not elevate blood sugar in the body in the same way as table sugar.

Nuts about nuts (and pulses and seeds) – these guys are powerhouses of nutrients, phytonutrients and resistant starch and can easily replace meat.

Take time for tea – a smaller lunch or a larger snack works at 3 or 4pm – try fruit, nuts, hummus or guacamole with veggies or raw balls.

Lose the dairy – it causes inflammation, its protein levels are too high for humans and it contains antibiotics and hormones; not to mention the horrific conditions that dairy cows are kept in and the environmental ramifications of dairy farming. Try making your own nut or coconut milk.

Banish the booze – it's full of empty calories, it's a toxin, and it stresses the body by releasing cortisol, which aids fat storage around your middle. Indulge in alcohol as just an occasional celebratory luxury.

Recipe guide

Breakfast

Nut milk

Soak one cup of mixed, raw nuts in two to three cups of water overnight. Drain and discard the water and blend the nuts with four more cups of water until almost smooth. Strain the blended mixture through a muslin or nut milk bag and refrigerate. Keep the nut meal for biscuits, cakes and breads.

Chocolate smoothie

Add a cup of nut milk to the blender with a handful of ice, two tablespoons of raw cacao powder, three or four dates (pits removed), and an optional splash of vanilla extract.

Snacks

Beetroot hummus

Roast, steam or boil a whole peeled beetroot. Place in the blender with a drained can of chickpeas, the juice of a lemon, a tablespoon of tahini, half a teaspoon of ground cumin and a little water or olive oil for your preferred consistency. Season, then serve with

crackers or crudités.

Flax-seed crackers

Preheat oven to 100°C and line a large baking tray with parchment paper. Soak one cup of flax seeds with three tablespoons of chia seeds in one cup of water for 20 minutes. Add three tablespoons of sunflower seeds, three tablespoons of pumpkin seeds, three tablespoons of za'atar or fresh herbs (rosemary and thyme work well) and one teaspoon of salt. Spread the mixture evenly on the baking sheet and bake for one hour, then flip and bake for another hour-and-a-half. Break into pieces when cooled.

Raw balls

Blend one cup of sunflower seeds, one cup of nuts (hazelnuts, walnuts, etc.), one cup of dates (pits removed), two tablespoons of raw cacao powder and a little water or lime juice. Mould into balls and refrigerate.

and contains a heap of fibre, but opt for a jacket spud rather than mash or roast), quinoa, sweet potatoes and so forth. Try and avoid pasta, even wholegrain."

As far as the kids are concerned, she recommends getting your own house in order first. "More often than not, the kids will follow. If you're tucking into a fun-looking, bright-pink beetroot dip, they're likely to ask if they can try it. And then you can start moving forward with other dishes."

She also suggests keeping a food diary, noting down everything that passes your lips. "It will make you think harder about the choices you're making."

As for alcohol, van de Pol recommends limiting it as much as you can. "Don't get into the habit of pouring a glass 'because it's Thursday night' or 'because I've had a bad day'. Save it for special occasions. Of course we all like a drink and to let our hair down, and I put my own hands up to having the odd blow-out, but it really isn't good for us, so keep it in check."

Ally van de Pol is the founder of Dragon Fitness and Coaching. For more information about her nutrition workshops, visit dragonfitnessandcoaching.com

