

Food to keep you alert without adding the kilos

Dr Kathryn de Luc discusses the impact of food on driving performance.

Ted has been a truckie for 15 years and is a fearless eater – morning, noon and night, he’s not afraid to pack in the meals - fast food chicken is his middle name.

Ted loves food: pizza, chips and meat pies are all part of his daily eat-and-drive routine. The trouble is that this diet of fatty fast foods and fizzy drinks, coupled with lack of exercise, is taking its toll. Ted is having trouble staying alert, particularly on the long drives, and is putting on weight. His doctor says he is at risk of medical problems such as diabetes and stroke, or even heart attack.

To fight fatigue and boredom Ted uses so-called pick-me-ups including cola drinks, coffee and, when off duty, alcohol. But, they have only temporary effect and they are contributing to his growing weight problem.

Sadly, Ted is not alone. Increased weight with associated medical problems and driver safety issues are affecting many truck drivers. This is partly due to the limited availability of healthy food when on the road, and the fact that truckies spend long hours sitting in a cab. The problem is often compounded by early morning starts, late finishes and night work.

Ted’s use of pick-me-ups isn’t working. Worse, some of these substances are addictive drugs. For example, caffeine is a stimulant and is commonly found in coffee, tea, chocolate and many fizzy drinks. While caffeine can temporarily reduce tiredness it is likely to interfere with the quality of sleep later on which means you’ll feel even more tired the following day.

Fizzy drinks usually contain large amounts of sugar so they may help you feel alert for a short period, but the effects are likely to be short-lived and you will feel worse afterwards. Check the labels so you know what you are drinking.

One of the more popular myths is that alcohol helps you sleep better. In fact, alcohol is a relaxant, but it actually disturbs the quality of your sleep so that when you are asleep you do not get the full benefit of sleep’s restorative powers.

We all love to snack on a pizza or pie but unfortunately these high carbohydrate processed foods do not help

us stay alert. Instead, if you can switch to “good” (complex) carbohydrates like brown rice, pasta and baked potatoes, you feel well fed and more alert for longer.

Smart food choices will not only enable the driver to reduce his or her risk of health problems but, with attention to food groups and the timing of meals, they will probably improve their driving performance by minimising fatigue.

When you improve your diet you can balance your blood sugar, which fuels the brain and body. The field of science that studies blood sugar levels categorises foods on the glycaemic index (GI). Foods that make blood sugar levels rise and fall slowly, and therefore help you maintain stable levels, are called low GI foods. Try and eat foods classified as low on the GI index rather than high. Examples of foods classified as high on the GI index include muffins, doughnuts, pies, crisps and many sweet snack bars.

With regard to the timing of meals - if you avoid going long periods without food, and instead eat small amounts but often, this helps to stabilise the blood sugar levels and minimises the dips in energy and alertness.

Drivers often mention to us their desire to reduce fatigue and sharpen their mind. Typically, they want to improve their performance so that they can better read the road, foresee potential hazards, judge distances and speed and have faster reactions when responding to unexpected situations.

The good news is that there are realistic, easy to follow guidelines that will assist the driver in his quest for better driving performance and better health.

- 1. Eat foods that help you maintain a stable blood-sugar level** and are classified as low GI foods such as oranges, apples, low-fat yoghurt, peanuts and cashews, rye or wholemeal bread and wholemeal pastas. Try and eat these in preference to sugary snacks.
- 2. Aim for three to four balanced, evenly sized meals** during the hours when you have to be awake. Alternatively, snacking little and often during work will help you stay alert.

3. Hike up your protein intake when you want to be awake. It helps us remain active and alert. However, it can be difficult to digest large and heavy amounts of it at night, which contributes to the digestive problems experienced by many who work shifts. So keep the portions small and avoid large steaks or large portions of red meat at night. Instead stick to lighter proteins including chicken, fish and eggs.

4. Water is an essential drink to maintain your alertness. Even mild dehydration can result in a drop in alertness and reaction times and can cause headaches. Thirst is not a reliable indicator of dehydration, so make sure you drink plenty of water – about six glasses a day is a good amount. Hunger can be a sign of dehydration, so consider drinking before eating something.

5. Coffee can affect co-ordination, concentration and behaviour. It can be used as a pick-me-up but if you drink too much it can lead to addiction and digestive problems. A cup of coffee will usually have an affect on the body within one hour of drinking. Avoid caffeine for at least four to five hours before trying to sleep.

6. A variety of fruit can be used as a healthy pick-me-up. Choose fruits bright in colour as these are great energy providers. For example apples, red berries, kiwifruit and oranges.

Go on line to our diet quiz to test your knowledge on diet and nutrition. Look on our web site: www.shiftwork.co.nz and follow the links in our diet and nutrition section. □

Dr Kathryn de Luc is a director of Shiftwork Services Ltd, a consultancy and training organisation specialising in providing fatigue, risk management, rostering solutions and wellness programmes for the 24/7 workplace. Visit us at www.shiftwork.co.nz or contact: kathy@shiftwork.co.nz

