Survival Diet Myths

By Haumana

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After years of research (since at least 1949), expert panels, and much debate, the United Nations, the WHO, the USDA, FEMA, various military organizations have come up with this definitive answer for what is the minimum daily nutrition requirement for a human in a survival situation: "We don't know. There are too many variables."

Millions of dollars, pounds, francs, marks spent and now we know the answer that will assist each of us in making our food preps as complete as possible to care for ourselves and our loved ones. ~Sarcasm is free today.~

As you review you food preps, consider this information from the WHO [edited with comments by me]:

Myth: Starving people can eat anything

Reality: It is widely held that people who are starving will be very hungry and eat any food that can be supplied. This attitude is inhumane and incorrect. Even if hungry initially, people often do not consume adequate quantities of unvaried and unfamiliar foods for long enough. More importantly, the starving people are often ill and may not have a good appetite. They will therefore languish in an emaciated state or get even sicker. Even someone well-nourished would fail to thrive on the monotonous diets of three or so commodities (e.g. wheat, beans and oil) that is all that is available, month in, month out, to many refugees and displaced people. And this is aside from the micro-nutrient deficiencies that often develop.... Source: Lancet, Vol. 340, Nov 28, 1992

Myth: Refugees [or survivors] can manage with less.

Reality: This misconception dehumanizes the refugee [or survivor].... In fact they will often need more than their normal food requirement at first if they have become malnourished and sick before arrival at a camp and need rehabilitation; and may suffer exposure from inadequate shelter. ...these rations have to be adequate in all nutrients. This requires a mixed food basket, including fruits and vegetables. If this cannot be ensured then trading may have to be encouraged if refugees [or survivors] are not to become undernourished and deficient in micro-nutrients. The fact that some foods may be traded, to add variety to the diet, is no grounds for reducing the ration. Source: Lancet, Vol. 340, Nov 28, 1992

Myth: A standard ration is suitable for all populations.

Reality: The recommended per caput calorie output for a refugee [survivor] population should vary according to demographic composition, nutritional and health status of the population (allowing for an extra "catch-up" allowance where people are malnourished), the activity level the intake is intended to support, environmental temperature, and likely wastage in the chain

from supply of food in a country to its consumption by individuals. In other words there is a range of requirements for dietary energy, which will depend on the circumstances, and use of a single figure is likely to lead to either deficit or wastage. The figure of 1900 kcal (commonly assumed to be of general application) often underestimates what is needed. Source: Lancet, Vol. 340, Nov 28, 1992

Myth: Energy adequacy means nutritional adequacy.

Reality: The diet needs to be adequate in both quantity and quality, meeting requirements for calories, protein, and micro-nutrients. Where refugees [survivors] are completely dependent on the ration provided -- for example, in the early stages of an emergency or in closed camps, where trading for diversity cannot be ensured -- the ration must be designed to meet the requirements of all nutrients in full. Often, a ration is designed to meet minimum energy requirements and micro-nutrients are left to look after themselves. How micro-nutrient needs are to be met must be made explicit, especially when the ration provided is calculated on the basis of fully meeting energy needs. Foods should be diverse and palatable, and the special needs of weaning children must be met.

In short, as we plan our preps we should look not only at shelf-life and storage space, but look at, as Piper correctly points out, special diet needs, micronutrients (good long shelf-life multiple vitamin/mineral supplements are a great start) and insuring that we have enough variety that our meals are not so dreary that we must force ourselves to eat them. It is essential that we plan our water stores/availability to match the situation (protein & calories consumed, climate, altitude, physical activity, amount needed for food preps).

Just so you won't get the idea that I've just Googled all of this for your viewing pleasure, we KNOW how long we can subsist on 400 lbs of rice, 200 lbs of quinoa, 200 lbs of TVP, 200 lbs of assorted dried beans, 20 3-liter cans of extra virgin olive oil, 20 jugs of maple syrup, 200 lbs of salt, about the same amount of granulated sugar, 50 of brown sugar, and lots of canned meats, etc. It's not bragging...we were forced into a survival mode and thank goodness we didn't have the "two-weeks ahead is better than nothing" mentality. None of us get there overnight (unless we hit the Lotto), so hang in there and work at it. There's been good advice from Piper, War, Sierra, Sentinel, and lots of other folks...learn from their experiences.