



Food as Medicine

Hosts: Rebecca Gillett, MS OTR/L, and Julie Eller

Guest: Rita Nguyen, MD

Eating a healthy diet is a key part to staying healthy and managing chronic disease, including arthritis. But barriers such as time constraints and budget can make it difficult to stay on track with healthy eating. In this podcast, we'll explore what leading medical professionals are doing to ensure access to nutritious foods, as well as discuss why a well-rounded, whole-foods approach is best. Listeners will also learn cooking, shopping and preparation tips on how to maximize the benefits of powerhouse foods for arthritis.

Our guest, Dr. Rita Nguyen, is an assistant health officer for the San Francisco Department of Public Health, Population Health Division, and she serves as the chronic disease physician specialist. In this role, she supports and provides thought leadership to chronic disease prevention efforts for the city and county of San Francisco. In 2015, she founded the Food as Medicine Collaborative in San Francisco, which is a multi-sector coalition, bridging food and health systems to address patient food insecurity and advance health equity. She's a practicing hospitalist at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital and an assistant clinical professor at UCSF.

Additional resources:

Expert Q&A: Best Diet for Arthritis: <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/healthy-living/nutrition/healthy-eating/expert-q-a-best-diet-for-arthritis>

Arthritis Diet Power Shopping: <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/healthy-living/nutrition/healthy-eating/arthritis-diet-powerA>

Get the Most Out of Your Arthritis Diet: <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/healthy-living/nutrition/healthy-eating/get-the-most-out-of-your-arthritis-diet>

Shopping for Arthritis-Friendly Foods: <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/healthy-living/nutrition/healthy-eating/shopping-for-arthritis-friendly-foods>

How to Read a Nutrition Label: <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/healthy-living/nutrition/healthy-eating/how-to-read-a-nutrition-label>

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How to Reduce Sugar in Your Diet: <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/healthy-living/nutrition/foods-to-limit/sugar>

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Welcome to Live Yes! With Arthritis, from the Arthritis Foundation. You may have arthritis, but it doesn't have you. Here, you'll learn things that can help you improve your life and turn No into Yes. This podcast is part of the Live Yes! Arthritis Network — a growing community of people like you who really care about conquering arthritis once and for all. Our hosts are arthritis patients Rebecca and Julie, and they are asking the questions you want answers to. Listen in.

Rebecca Gillett:

Welcome to the Live Yes! With Arthritis podcast. I'm Rebecca, an occupational therapist living with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis.

Julie Eller:

And I'm Julie, a JA patient who's passionate about making sure all patients have a voice.

MUSIC BRIDGE

Rebecca:

Thanks for joining us on this episode of the Live Yes! With Arthritis Podcast. We are talking about food. The question everybody always wants to ask is how does what I eat affect my symptoms? We all know that eating a healthy diet is important to stay healthy and manage our arthritis. But how do we go about doing that? That's the hard part, Julie.

Julie:

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Oh my gosh, and not to mention, it can be time consuming and expensive and stressful. Learning how to eat a healthful diet can be a real big bite to chew, so to speak! (laughing)

Rebecca:

I love that.

Julie:

I spend more money on trying to figure out the right ingredients to buy and then I never really end up using all of them. And then I'm throwing food away, and I don't know how to do it the right way. And I think we all need guidance sometimes on how to achieve a healthy diet in full and how to serve our arthritis on the way.

Rebecca:

You don't want it to be out of reach for people to actually try to figure out what the healthy diet is. So, that's why we're excited to have our guest today.

Julie:

Right. Dr. Rita Nguyen is an assistant health officer for the San Francisco Department of Public Health, Population Health Division, and she serves as the chronic disease physician specialist. In this role, she supports and provides thought leadership to chronic disease prevention efforts for the city and county of San Francisco. In 2015, she founded the Food as Medicine Collaborative in San Francisco, which is a multi-sector coalition, bridging food and health systems to address patient food insecurity and advance health equity. She's a practicing hospitalist at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital and an assistant clinical professor at UCSF.

Rebecca:

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Dr. Nguyen, thanks so much for joining us on the podcast. Can you tell us a little bit more about your organization, Food as Medicine?

Dr. Rita Nguyen:

I'm happy to be able to join you today. So, the Food as Medicine Collaborative in the San Francisco Bay Area is a multi-sector coalition bridging health care and food systems to promote this concept of food as medicine, to address food insecurity and support nutritional behavior change. We support onsite food programming within health care settings. We promote culture change in health care to embrace food insecurity as a health care issue. And support policy change such as having health insurers pay for food as part of medical care. I think the main thrust of the collaborative is to really bridge this divide between health care systems and food systems.

We've created now 11 food pharmacies in clinics throughout San Francisco and Marin County. And I think it has really changed the way that health care providers and the health care systems think about their role in addressing food insecurity.

Julie:

It's fascinating when we think about food as medicine. Oftentimes in the arthritis space, you're thinking about what kind of additives and things like turmeric and sour cherry juice that you can add into your diet. It sounds to me like from a food/food pharmacy perspective, it's more about food insecurity and making sure that every person can have access to a healthful diet. Is that right?

Dr. Nguyen:

Yeah, I would say that that is a particular focus, focus of food insecurity, especially in a time of COVID. Before COVID hit, about 11% of households in the U.S. were food insecure, and now it's closer to one in four to one in three households, depending on what ethnic group you're looking at, are food insecure. So, it does seem a little bit out of touch to talk about specific things like turmeric and goji berries when such large segments of the population aren't even able to access basic necessities for food.

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Julie:

Would you mind defining what food insecure means for someone who may not have heard that term before?

Dr. Nguyen:

Food insecurity is the lack of consistent access to enough food to maintain a healthy, active lifestyle. It's different than hunger, because hunger is actually a sensation; it's a physiological response to not eating enough. Whereas food security is making sure that you have consistent access to, enough food to, stay healthy.

Julie:

I'm hopeful you can also share a little bit about what it means to fill a food prescription? How does that support the idea of using food as medicine? And are there food prescriptions even replacing medicines?

Dr. Nguyen:

As a physician myself, it's frustrating, trying to manage chronic disease for my patients, whether it be inflammatory arthritis, or heart disease, or diabetes. And to have them come back and tell me their symptoms or their blood glucose levels aren't quite controlled yet. And yet I try to advise on like sort of the holistic view. It's not just what I'm prescribing to you, but it's also your healthy diet, it's your exercise. And when patients come back to me and say, "You know, it stresses me out that you say that. Because it's not as if I don't want to eat well, but I can't afford it. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know what to eat."

And sometimes all I'm able to do is write another prescription. And it's very frustrating that we're not, as a health care system, able to address the other half of the equation, the chronic care equation,

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that healthy eating is part of this. And so, this idea of having foods prescriptions is sort of to address that. Our health care system writes prescriptions for medications, we have a mechanism to pay for it, through insurance, to pay for pills. But why don't we have a mechanism to make sure that people with chronic disease, that have diet-sensitive chronic disease, can fill prescriptions for food, if food is actually part of the equation of treatment?

We actually make it possible. So, you can fill these prescriptions onsite for healthy, fresh, whole grain foods at the clinic. And it's this marrying of this idea of food and health that I think there's real great potential in sort of leveraging health care systems into the nutrition space.

Rebecca:

How many places across the country actually have a food pharmacy?

Dr. Nguyen:

So, it's hard to exactly quantify. Folks have tried. Oftentimes, what we've seen that it requires like a single champion physician or provider, or registered dietitian, who says I want to do it, and they make it possible in their clinic. This is a commitment from health systems across San Francisco saying, "Yes, we see the trend here, we see how we need to address sort of the underlying factors that lead to health disparities and poor health outcomes."

We cannot ignore the fact that our people can't eat well, or don't know how to eat well, and so we need to do something about it. We've pulled together folks across the state to appeal at the state level to get Medicaid to pay for food as a covered medical benefit to help manage chronic disease.

Rebecca:

Wow, that, I mean, really, like (laughing), it's almost like, why haven't we been doing this before? Kudos to you, and the fact that there's four health care systems that you have buy-in from in a large

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city like San Francisco, I think that's systemic change. And that's probably what is needed really to change the policy like you're talking about.

Dr. Nguyen:

I totally agree. It's not enough to be a one-off and help just that one patient. And I mean, it's great and impactful for the individual. But if you want something more sustainable and large scale, you have to start thinking about: How do I change the system in which we're in?

Julie:

I wonder if you'd be able to talk about why a healthy diet and a healthful diet is important to an arthritis patient, in particular?

Dr. Nguyen:

Yeah, so what I like about the concept of food as medicine is that it empowers patients to actively pursue health rather than just be passive recipients of care. So, it's absolutely true that, for most diseases and inflammatory arthritis, in particular, that medical therapy must be on board. Patients can then feel empowered to make changes in their life through nutrition and physical activity that get them even more benefit than the medications alone. So, globally, I think, absolutely patients need to be taking their medications, particularly, inflammatory arthritis.

And then the nutritional aspects of how you manage your chronic disease can overall make you feel better across many different sectors. So, it's not eating the diet that would help with inflammatory arthritis. It's the same diet that would help with your cardiac risk, same diet that would help with gut health and with mental health. And so, generally, the concepts of eating healthy are across the board beneficial for multiple chronic conditions.

Rebecca:

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What does the research tell us that that anti-inflammatory diet looks like?

Dr. Nguyen:

There's limitations in nutrition research. I think the reason why there's so much confusion out there is because it's really hard for the scientific and medical community to make definitive statements about exactly what you should be eating and exactly what quantitative benefit you're getting if you're eating X, Y or Z.

There are some clear trends, though, and some diets that are actually quite well studied. I really ascribe to what the food writer and author Michael Pollan says about eat food, not too much, mostly vegetables. What he means there is to eat real food. Not heavily processed foods, not things that come in bags in the middle of the grocery store that like that have been sitting there for years. And yet somehow you're still able to magically consume it. He means eat whole foods, and the message I really like to emphasize is cook.

If you're eating food, real food, it should require you to prepare and cook it. And that really then pushes you to be buying things like whole grains, fruits and vegetables. The the next piece is about eating not too much. And that's all about portion and moderation, and in part, variety, too. Folks definitely should not be overeating. And the last part is mostly vegetables. If you find yourself eating mostly vegetables, by virtue of that, you're just going to eat less meat, less red meat. You're going to end up eating less carbs and fat.

Carbs are important, and there are healthy carbs that you could be eating, like those that come from vegetables like beets and corn. And eating healthy carbs from whole grains and so forth. Every once in a while is fine in moderation. Like, I do eat white bread on occasion, and I do eat regular pasta. But I just am mindful of not doing it too much and that's not normally the sort of starch base that I eat.

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Aim for variety of fruits and vegetables. People often talk about eating their rainbow, and I think that's where the things like superfoods and antioxidants come in. It's great in moderation, it does not replace the fact that you're not eating well. Eat a diet that you can maintain, because a lot of fad diets and a lot of buckets of things like, you know, inflammatory foods, are not... It's hard to stick to any one of those, you have to eat a diet that you can actually sustain.

If you're going to start a fad for a couple weeks or a month, that's not going to transform your life. You need to be eating (laughs) every day of the year for the rest of your life, and if you could find a way to really incorporate these healthy habits in, that's gonna go a long way for any chronic disease you're trying to manage or prevent.

Rebecca:

I think the hard part for everybody to digest (laughing), pun intended, is that there isn't one specific answer that you can give me. So that's why maybe, you know, people turn to some of these trendy diets like Keto or Paleo, or you know, old school Atkins. Having higher protein and putting an emphasis on a certain food group or certain macronutrients isn't always maybe the best approach is basically what you're saying.

Dr. Nguyen:

Yeah, because it's not sustainable. But it also doesn't give you the variety you need. I think the USDA's shift from the food pyramid to the healthy plate model makes a lot of sense. Where half the plate should be vegetables and fruit, mostly vegetables, and then the other half should be a quarter whole grains and a quarter healthy protein. The best diets that have been studied are things like a Mediterranean diet, which follows exactly what I've been saying, which is like mostly vegetables, whole grains, legumes, healthy oils. That is a very well-studied diet, and it has shown that it is great for a number of chronic diseases. Which is like leafy green vegetables, fruits, nuts, fatty fish, things like tomatoes and olive oil. And so that's the great news about these healthy diets; for the most part, the answer is generally the same. Whether you're trying to be anti-inflammatory or for mental health or gut health, nature tried to help us out here, they try to make it easy for us (laughing). But I think our technology and our processing of food has complicated things.

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Julie:

I think it's a really meaningful shift in thinking to approach it more like what you're saying, Dr. Nguyen, about it's not controlling the one item, it's controlling the holistic meal, the holistic diet. And it's not a fad diet, it's not a Keto, Paleo, Atkins situation, it's a lifestyle diet. It's not one that's short term but lifestyle.

Dr. Nguyen:

Find ways to make it sustainable in the long run. We are not prescribing two carrots, three blueberries, and like you know eight apples (laughing). We actually just prescribe that people come to the food pharmacy. And all the food there has been selected by a registered dietitian, it follows all the same categories. I think 60% is fresh produce and the rest is whole grains, nuts and legumes, when we get them, and beans and so forth. And, basically, we're saying everything here is healthy, eat it in moderation, don't only go to potatoes then. But like incorporate all of this into the way you eat. Take your medications, eat an overall healthy diet.

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18th at <https://www.arthritis.org/events/nutrition>.

Rebecca:

Are there any foods that people should absolutely stay away from when they have arthritis?

Dr. Nguyen:

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Yeah. So, I would generally say that heavily processed foods, especially processed and preserved meats, are things that folks should try to avoid to the extent possible. I mean, ideally cut out, but minimize. They tend to have more refined grains and refined sugar as well as salt and what we call "the bad fats." The more saturated fat and trans-fat. They always tend to have more calories because they're infused with so much sugar and refined grains to make them taste good.

And a lot of these sort of ingredients, like refined grains and refined sugar, have been associated with more inflammation and is bad for a number of different chronic diseases. So I would, to the extent possible, try to avoid it, and it goes back to my main message of like, cook. The more you cook and prepare your own food and are using whole ingredients, the better it is.

The one caveat I would say to that is like minimally processed foods, things that are like canned, or frozen, like they still processed, right? Like you didn't just buy them off the shelf, they're not fresh. But that's not to say they're not of value and healthy to you. In many respects, like frozen fruits and vegetables can actually have more nutrients than fresh ones because they get picked in their prime, they're frozen, the nutrients are still in there. So, there's definitely a role for canned and frozen items. And then it actually gets to my other piece of like, whatever makes it easy and sustainable for you to eat well is a good solution. So, if you're more likely to eat beans and vegetables because they're canned or frozen, and they're available to you, then do it.

Julie:

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how someone could emulate a food pharmacy experience while they're walking around the grocery store. What aisle should I go down? Where should I shop?

Dr. Nguyen:

That's a really great question. If you look at the way grocery stores are arranged, fruits and vegetables and fish and so forth tend to be at the margins. So, if you spend more time there, then you're more likely to buy whole types of foods that you can cook. The exception being grains, grains

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tend to be in some aisle. And then, you know, when you're purchasing grains, to the extent possible, whole grains over refined grains.

The other thing we try to teach people when they're grocery shopping is nutrition label reading. And I understand how the numbers can get confusing to folks. Not everybody seems to recognize it, but it's actually listed in order of the most prominent ingredient to the least. So, a lot of food items actually start with sugar, which is terrible (laughing). That means you're eating mostly sugar. But if you see things like that, it's mostly just the grains, the vegetables and the fruit. Some healthy oils and seeds that made the product, then those are better products than things with a lot of words you can't pronounce.

Julie:

Yeah, my mom has a 10-ingredient rule: If it has more than 10 ingredients, walk away from it.

Dr. Nguyen:

That's a great rule. The other thing which is great about nutrition labels is they're starting to add added sugars because added sugar is basically refined sugar. That's anything that's not coming naturally from that food item. And we know that refined sugar, just like refined grains, is associated with more inflammation and linked to a number of chronic diseases: obesity, liver disease and so forth.

People can actually lose weight if they just cut out all sugar-sweetened beverage from their diet, depending on how much they're consuming. I think folks don't realize that the daily Coke or the daily SunnyD that they're drinking is actually giving them hundreds of calories a day that they could be losing. But also, it's just very inflammatory.

Rebecca:

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What about the sugar you get from eating fruit?

Dr. Nguyen:

The sugar you get from eating fruit is different than refined sugar. If fruits are taking up about a quarter of your meal a day, that would be a great balance. Again, referencing back the healthy plate model.

Julie:

Could you give us some sugar buzzwords that we can look out for other than just sugar?

Dr. Nguyen:

Yeah, so high fructose corn syrup I think is the biggest offender. That is sugar, but it is also just a heavily processed refined sugar product that has been associated with a lot of sort of poor health outcomes and conditions. So high fructose corn syrup, sugar, refined sugar, things that say sucrose or fructose are also elements of sugar.

Rebecca:

Do you think there are any foods that we should really work hard to incorporate into our daily meal plans to help promote our well-being and our health with arthritis types?

Dr. Nguyen:

Yeah. So, again, it would be the same things I would encourage for my patients who are trying to have better heart health, better diabetes, better mental health. So, vegetables, great variety of vegetables to the extent you can. Nuts and legumes, trying to eat a variety of fruits sort of covering your rainbow. Eating fish, pretty good fatty fish would be helpful. Using olive oil and other healthy plant-based oils.

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Julie:

Some of the foods that you listed, especially fish or some high-priced vegetables like organic vegetables, things like that. They can feel kind of inaccessible, or they can be unaffordable. I'm wondering, can we think about some of the suggestions you might have to access these kinds of food products affordably?

Dr. Nguyen:

Yes, I would say my general advice to my patients who tend to be much more resource constrained, my first message is cook. Cook as much as you can. Buy in bulk, which also helps you buy things like beans and whole grains that you can then infuse into a number of meals, and then meal plan.

So, you can think about ways that what you cook can go further and into multiple meals. Like having a roasted chicken is a lot of meat. But you can also find ways to make it into a chicken salad or make a sandwich, and there are just ways that you can stretch food items to go further.

Julie:

Yeah.

Dr. Nguyen:

I'll also make a comment on organic food. I think the evidence is clear that organic food is better for the soil and better for nature. But the health benefits are not there, and the same goes for GMO. There's a lot of anti-GMO rhetoric out there, but the data doesn't really support that GMO foods are unhealthy for you. In the same way that there's not clear evidence that organic food is better for you than non-organic.

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I think baby steps are important. If you can even just start with one meal a week, if that's where you're at. I think people should be kind to themselves and start slow and not be so hard on themselves for not eating 100% optimal foods all the time. I think that's a recipe for failure and getting down on yourself by sort of letting the perfect be the enemy of good. So, cook what you can, as much as you can, start small.

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Dr. Nguyen:

You know, a lot of mothers are taking care of kids with inflammatory arthritis. And, for me personally, having kids was my main motivator to eat better. Because it's more natural for me to take care of others than myself, unfortunately, and I think maybe a lot of mothers feel the same way.

Rebecca:

Yeah.

Dr. Nguyen:

But having kids was really what changed me, and I ended up cooking a lot more. And the great news there for all you mothers out there, or fathers, honestly, who are doing most of the cooking at home, is you're setting up a lifetime of habits for your kids. Especially, the younger kids, from like ages zero to five are so key. But also you're setting habits for how they eat in the future. So, I just want to give kudos to everyone who's like preparing and cooking meals for kids at home.

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Rebecca:

I don't think I could have said that any better.

Dr. Nguyen:

Even the approach to eating well is that it has to be holistic, it can't be like, you know, single food items that you're trying to infuse. The same goes for social connectiveness and social cohesiveness. With COVID, it's people are very limited with who they can socialize and eat with. So, it's unprecedented times on multiple accounts. But I think most of my plug is the importance of social connectedness. Like it is part of the whole view of health and wellness, and it is linked to food.

Rebecca:

Yeah, but the silver lining in COVID, though, I think for families, is that we're eating more meals together as a family now.

Julie:

Are there certain tips that you can help us, that can help us maximize the nutritional benefits that we get from food? For example, I know a friend who has a juicer and swears by it. She says she's able to consume two cups of vegetables in a single serving of juice. Is the juicing craze everything it's cracked up to be?

Dr. Nguyen:

I think the greatest benefit to juicing is probably that people are eating more fruits and vegetables. I think most people have more trouble with vegetables than consuming enough fruit. I would say the biggest drawback is that you're not getting the fiber from fruits and vegetables when you're juicing. So, in general, I would actually say eating the whole vegetable and fruit, like of course just the edible parts, would be better than juicing.

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Julie:

Are there things that we can do to maximize the nutrients in food as we cook?

Dr. Nguyen:

It depends on the food. Generally speaking, for vegetables, you don't want to overcook vegetables because it loses a lot of its nutrient value. That being said, I tend not to get this nitty-gritty with my patients because I think folks generally have more issue with eating well over the long term than adhering to like strictly cooking things only one way. Like you can have sort of maybe like one meal that's optimally cooked, but I just can't imagine people adhering to like how to, what to eat raw, what to sauté, what to boil, what to like cook al dente ... for like 365 days out of the year.

Julie:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). (laughs)

Dr. Nguyen:

The other general rule of thumb about cooking is that you don't want to char or burn things. I know that makes a lot of things taste good. So, again, in moderation (laughing). Like if, if caramelizing your onions gets you to eat some dish more, then in moderation, once in a while. I think the other mistake people make is they start cooking and they kind of go overboard. And they're like, "I'm not gonna use any butter or salt or sugar or anything." And then they end up cooking something they won't eat.

My whole message of cook sustainably, like cook in a way that you will actually eat it. And the fact that you added some amount of salt or some amount of butter to it is still better than if you ate the pizza out of the frozen aisle.

The other thing about charring, like certain meats that are charred, they release a lot of toxins that have been linked to cancer. And then for a lot of oils, you want to make sure you don't get past it's

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smoking or a burning point, because it then starts to release toxins as well. So, just being mindful to not burn things.

Rebecca:

A lot of people are tea drinkers. So, are there any benefits for teas and elixirs for people with arthritis?

Dr. Nguyen:

I think if it were that obvious that teas and elixirs were scientifically proven to be beneficial (laughing), that it would be a much clearer and resounding message for the medical community. I think it falls more in the realm of teas that add variety and herbs and so forth to your diet. So that seems like that would be good to just sort of add more colors to the rainbow, add more variety. If it keeps you from drinking sugar sweetened beverages, then yes, it is absolutely better. It's great to drink tea if it keeps you from drinking the things you shouldn't be drinking, and it adds a little bit of variety.

Julie:

Trying to find the things that you can enjoy that will be a better part of your day than having that soda. Because, at the end of the day, the soda is not doing you any favors.

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Rebecca:

If there were three takeaways that you'd give to our audience about our conversation on food and arthritis, what would those be?

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Dr. Nguyen:

I would say eat food, not too much, mostly vegetables, eat a variety of foods and eat the diet that you can sustain. Those are the three succinct ones. Eat more vegetables in greater variety, eat whole grains, eat less red meat and processed meat, and avoid refined sugars in all products that you eat.

Rebecca:

And there you go. Thanks so much for joining us today, Dr. Nguyen. We really, I learned a lot.

Julie:

An absolute pleasure to have you on the podcast.

Dr. Nguyen:

It was wonderful. Thank you for having me.

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