

# The Importance of Eating Well Gretchen Stalters, MS, RD, Dietitian

## What happens when I don't eat?

Your body uses food as fuel to keep all the important organs and cells in your body running well. When you don't eat, your body doesn't get the fuel it needs and your organs and body parts can suffer.

- **The Heart & Circulation:** Your heart is a muscle that can shrink and weaken when you don't eat. This can create circulation problems and an irregular heartbeat. Blood pressure can get very low during starvation and make you feel dizzy when you stand up.
- **The Stomach:** Your stomach becomes smaller when you don't eat so when you start eating again, your stomach is likely to feel uncomfortable (you may have stomach aches and/or gas). Also, your stomach will not empty as fast making you feel full longer.
- **The Intestines:** Your intestines will move food slowly often resulting in constipation and/or stomach aches or cramps when you eat meals.
- **The Brain:** Your brain, which controls the rest of your body's functions, does not work properly without food. For example, you may have trouble thinking clearly or paying attention and/or you could also feel anxious or sad.
- **Body Cells:** The balance of electrolytes in the blood can be changed with malnutrition or with purging. Without food, the amount of potassium and phosphorous can get dangerously low which can cause problems with your muscles, changes in your brain functioning, and cause life-threatening heart and rhythm problems.
- **Bones:** When you don't eat, your bones often become weak due to low calcium and low hormone levels, which increases your risk of getting broken bones now and developing weak bones when you're older.
- **Body Temperature:** Your body naturally lowers its temperature in times of starvation to conserve energy and protect vital organs. When this happens, there is a decrease in circulation (blood flow) to your fingers and toes which will often cause your hands and feet to feel cold and look bluish.
- **Skin:** Your skin becomes dry when your body is not well hydrated and when it does not get enough vitamins and minerals from food. The skin will naturally protect your body during periods of starvation by developing fine, soft hair called "lanugo" that covers the skin to keep your body warm.
- **Hair:** When your hair doesn't get enough nourishment from the vitamins and minerals that are naturally found in healthy food, it becomes dry, thin and it can even fall out.
- **Nails:** Your nails require nutrients in the form of vitamins and minerals from your diet. When you don't eat, you deny your body what it needs and your nails become dry and brittle and break easily.
- **Teeth:** Your teeth need vitamin D and calcium from food sources. Without both of these minerals, you can end up with dental problems such as tooth decay and gum disease.

