Choosing the path of transplantation requires embarking on a journey that can be qualified as an adventure, one that is mysterious to the uninformed. My goal here is to de-mystify the nutrition aspects of this miracle of modern medical technology.

First of all, what is nutrition? It is described as the process by which the body takes in and uses food, especially food that it needs to stay healthy.

In the waiting period prior to a transplant, good nutrition plays a vital role in helping the potential recipient maintain maximum health and well-being. This can greatly affect the transplant surgery itself, the healing process, and also the quality of life afterwards.

It is a known fact that our need for calories, protein, vitamins and minerals is increased in time of illness. Malnutrition occurs when the body is significantly deprived of adequate nutrition. When the body is malnourished, there is a decrease in muscle mass and protein stores.

Malnutrition can lead to an impaired immune response. This means the body will have difficulty fighting infection. Malnutrition also interferes with the body’s ability to heal a wound; it lacks the building blocks needed to build and repair tissue.

Likewise, malnutrition can affect the internal organs. For example, it can cause a decrease of cardiac and respiratory functions. It can lead to impaired nutrient absorption and cause vitamin and mineral depletions.

From a more esthetic point of view, poor nutrition can cause hair loss, poor skin color and integrity, bleeding gums, cavities, dry eyes and weak nails, just to mention a few visible symptoms. Ultimately, malnutrition can lead to death.

“If we could give every individual the right amount of nourishment and exercise, not too little and not too much, we would have found the safest way to health,” said Hippocrates.

Lucretius was wise to say: “One person’s food is another’s poison.” Eating a lot of meat could cause someone who has cirrhosis to be confused and do pretty silly things. Worse, this confusion can lead them into a dangerous situation. Every child has been told by their mother to drink lots of milk to grow strong bones. Did you know that too much milk can cause someone with kidney failure to have renal bone disease?

It is very important for you to take ownership of your special needs and your well-being. You need to know what is good for you and what can actually harm you. Sophocles warned, “No enemy is worse than bad advice.” Do seek the advice of your doctor or your dietitian before taking any herbal remedy as these may be very potent and could interact with your medications.

Medications, whether modern pharmacological agent or centuries-old herbal remedy, have the ability to be of great benefit, but can also cause serious damage to our bodies. I’m sure you’ve heard the expression: “knowing is half the battle.” Keep that thought in mind when taking any medication whether prescription or over-the-counter. Also, do not choose “mega” (large) doses of vitamins and minerals unless prescribed by your doctor. Make a point of asking your doctor or pharmacist if there are special instructions to be aware of regarding your medications.
Following are a few drug-nutrient tidbits that may be of interest to you:

- **Food:** presence of food in the stomach may increase, decrease, or even prolong the absorption rate of certain drugs.
- **Drug + mineral:** absorption of medication is blocked when certain drugs (such as Cipro) bind with calcium from dairy products, supplements or antacids.
- **Nutrient losses:** Lasix is a very helpful medication to help rid the body of unwanted fluid. The low sodium diet works hand in hand with Lasix to reduce fluid in the body. As water is flushed out of the body, sodium, potassium, magnesium and calcium are lost.
- **Constipation:** antidepressants, antihistamines, analgesics and narcotics cause constipation by slowing down the intestinal peristalsis (the movement that causes the food to pass through the bowel).
- **Upset stomach:** Many drugs upset the stomach lining causing nausea, vomiting, bleeding or even ulcers, especially if taken on an empty stomach. NSAIDs such as acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin), ibuprofen (Advil) and naprosyn (Aleve) can cause bleeding.

Each of these drug-nutrient interactions can be alleviated through proper information. It is a good idea to consult a dietitian to help you manage or prevent your medications’ side effects. A dietitian can always be reached at your local hospital, at least by telephone.

A transplant recipient must follow the right diet and not be afraid to do so no matter what the circumstances. It can take three weeks of following a low sodium diet to lose the craving for salty tasting food. A new diet can present a wonderful opportunity for culinary adventures of new tastes, textures and sounds.

Restaurants are more and more willing and able to accommodate people with special diets. “If you don’t ask, you don’t get” goes for both restaurant outings and family events. Let people know you’re on a special diet. It may mean giving them a copy of your restrictions and special needs. People want to do the right thing. It’s your job to make sure they are taught. Be an aware consumer, read food labels. Anyone can learn to be a smart shopper.

It is a well-known fact that in times of illness every little bit of good nutrition counts. It is always a good idea to seek help. Family awareness and support of your special needs is invaluable in maintaining optimal health. Someone is sure to come up with a few tips or recipes (or maybe a free meal!) that will work for you and help you overcome any eating obstacles you may have encountered.

Help may come from one of your loved ones, a good friend, a dietitian or your doctor. Make use of community and technological resources such as your public library, support groups and the internet. Consult reputable and credible sources of information such as [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com), [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics), and [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org) (American Heart Association).

Galen was a physician who practiced medicine way back in the second century. He professed his “laws of health” – “eat proper foods, drink the right beverages, exercise, breathe fresh air, get enough sleep, have a daily bowel movement and control your emotions.”

**So what’s the bottom line?**

- Seek and acquire the necessary knowledge to maintain quality of life and dignity.
- Keep loved ones close to you.
- Always remember that your support system is made up of not only the people who are close to you, such as your family and friends, but also the whole transplant team.

**The transplant journey is never traveled alone.**