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Speaker 1: Welcome to a recap of our latest Ask the MD video. Tune in as a movement disorder specialist at the Michael J. Fox Foundation answers your questions about Parkinson's research and care. Learn more about living well with Parkinson's disease. Free resources like this podcast are always available at [michaeljfox.org](http://michaeljfox.org).

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Hi. I'm Dr. Rachel Dolhun. I'm a movement disorder specialist and lifestyle medicine physician at the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research. Welcome to Ask the MD In Conversation, where I talk with community members and other experts about Parkinson's and related topics. Today, we're going to talk about something we all do all the time, and that's eat. And we're going to tell you how to eat in ways that boost your brain health or help you manage disease like Parkinson's. We're joined by Dr. Erin Presant, who's also a movement disorder specialist, as well as a culinary medicine specialist. Erin and I actually did our medical training together, and we're excited to share our passion for food as a tool to help boost brain health or manage disease.

Erin, thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Erin Presant: Thank you for having me.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: One of the questions we both commonly get is, what's the best diet for Parkinson's or for brain health? And the short answer is there really isn't one that we know of yet, right? But we'll often respond, eat a healthy balanced diet. And a lot of people wonder, what does that really mean? So can you break down for us, what does healthy mean? What does balanced mean?

Dr. Erin Presant: So healthy really means getting back to the basics of you want the whole food straight from its source, as much as you can get it. So that's getting back to whole fruits and vegetables like we have here with all their beautiful colors that they bring to the table. That really helps with giving you all kinds of nutrients.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: So healthy is the whole ... It looks like it came from the ground. This apple, like I just picked it from a tree. You can recognize it. It's in its natural form. It's fruits, it's vegetables as our primary source of food.

Dr. Erin Presant: Right. Right. And whole grains as well. Carbohydrates are a necessary part of our diet and we want them to come from mainly these whole grains, including whole wheat, we have brown rice. All these wonderful different whole grains that we can incorporate into our diet.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: And a healthy whole grain doesn't have to be just brown rice. It can be half brown rice, half white rice, but there are many others too, other whole grains.

Dr. Erin Present: Yeah. There are whole grains from all different parts of the world that maybe aren't as common here in America, but there are a lot of whole grains that have gained more popularity. Like farro here is a whole grain that you can find at pretty much any grocery store nowadays, and you cook it the same way as rice. So it's really simple and a great way to experiment.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Quinoa.

Dr. Erin Present: Quinoa. Yeah.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: And as you said, you cook it's just water and boiling it. It's easy to do. You use it the same way. It can be a side, you can mix it into a salad, mix it up with a stir-fry, whatever works to bring that in. And same with vegetables. It doesn't just have to be broccoli or it doesn't have to just be apples. It can be whatever is in season, what's accessible to you, what you like.

Dr. Erin Present: Right. And in fact, using that in season vegetables or fruits that you see at the grocery store at a local farmer's market can help you to be introduced to new things that you might not have tried before and make your food more interesting.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: And frozen can be okay too.

Dr. Erin Present: Absolutely.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: So we talked about the healthy. Now let's talk about the balance. What does that mean?

Dr. Erin Present: Well, I think the easiest way to be thinking about balance is that you want a little bit of all different things on your plate. So you want vegetables, you want a fruit, you want some whole grain and you want some protein and some healthy fats. And by making your plate really colorful, you will probably get all of that stuff. So the balance just makes sure that you're getting all of these different nutrients from all these different sources.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: So eating the rainbow is important because you get different nutrients from different colors.

Dr. Erin Present: That's right.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: An important point I want to stress too is you talk about how to structure your plate. What should our plate look like?

Dr. Erin Present: Right. So at least in America, we thought for a long time, half of our plate should be an animal-based protein, so like steak or chicken or whatever we were having that day. And really we don't need to have that much traditional protein on our plate. So half the plate should be closer to vegetables. You should have some fruit, you should have some whole grains, those should be the majority of the plate, and then add in a protein, which can be an animal or a plant-based protein.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: So I want to get back to that topic, but before we get to protein, let's talk a little bit about specific diets because different day, different diet. You hear about which is the latest fad diet or which is the best for heart health or brain health. But we do, especially in Parkinson's, hear a lot about the Mediterranean diet. And there has been a lot of research to show that that could be beneficial for potentially delaying the onset of Parkinson's and people who might be at risk, but also helping us ease symptoms of Parkinson's. So tell us what the Mediterranean diet is, but then how we can get back to that healthy balance concept using what we know from there.

Dr. Erin Presant: Right. I think the first thing to point out about the Mediterranean diet is it doesn't mean that you have to just eat Mediterranean food. So if you're not from that part of the world, you don't like hummus or falafel.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Doesn't have to be all salmon.

Dr. Erin Presant: It doesn't have to be all salmon. So the bottom of the Mediterranean diet pyramid is whole fruits and vegetables. So incorporating any of the fruits and vegetables that you like. Maybe it's a lot of mushrooms, maybe it's avocado or papaya. And then whole grains are really important part of the Mediterranean diet as well and legumes. So legumes are like beans. Peanuts are legume. So if you like black eyed peas, if you like lentils, all of these things are really important in the Mediterranean diet.

What is limited or less used in the Mediterranean diet are really unhealthy fats. You want to get back to like the olive oil.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Healthy fat.

Dr. Erin Presant: Healthy fats. And then we also limit the amount of meat that we're eating in the Mediterranean diet and increase seafood or fish more so than what most Americans do.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: So yeah, it's flipped on its head a little bit. A lot of times we start with the protein and that's our base, but it's really building the base around the fruits and vegetables and the grains and then adding a little bit of protein in on top of that. Now protein is important. So tell us why it's important and who it's important for.

Dr. Erin Presant: Protein's important for everybody really. If you're eating chicken for dinner or salmon, then you're going to meet your protein requirements for the day. However, as we age, we sometimes require more protein as we have this natural muscle mass loss. And if you have a chronic disease like Parkinson's disease, for instance, you may also require more protein. Working with a dietician can really help you to figure out how much protein you should be incorporating into your diet. And that might be important for you if you're trying to make dietary changes.

But there are a lot of other sources of protein besides the chicken or the fish that are not necessarily from animal sources. So plant-based proteins. So you have tofu ... Has a lot of protein. Even lentils have protein.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Beans.

Dr. Erin Present: Yeah, beans. Eggs of course have protein. Then you have things like hemp seeds or flax seeds which have gained popularity. So there are a lot of different protein sources out there besides just your typical, what we think of as protein steak, chicken.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: And it's a lot about learning as you go. So you may not know that there's protein and chia seeds, but it's about starting to interact with your food a little bit more, looking at labels, asking dietician or your doctor for help or even looking online for some more information on what are high protein sources in plant-based foods. But protein can be a really sticky one for a lot of people with Parkinson's. As you mentioned, it's important to get, but it can interact with levodopa, the medication that many people take for Parkinson's and make it feel less effective. Tell us about that interaction and then tell us what people can do.

Dr. Erin Present: So if you're living with Parkinson's and you do take levodopa, the levodopa and the dietary protein that you ingest bind to the same receptor. And so if you ingest a bunch of protein and then take your levodopa, that levodopa doesn't have anywhere to go.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Less of it will get absorbed.

Dr. Erin Present: Right. So your symptoms may not improve.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Your medicine might not kick in. It might not last as long. It just might not work as well in general.

Dr. Erin Present: Yeah. And so a lot of people in clinic will say, "I just can't move. I don't know why I can't move sometimes when I take my levodopa and other times I'm okay." And a lot of times that has to do with when they're taking the medication in association with dietary protein. Some ways to combat that are to maybe eat things that have less protein in them with your medication, like more vegetables or more fruits with your medication, a piece of whole grain bread, and then eat the protein later in the evening so that you're not necessarily affecting your movement as much when you need to be out and about.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Now staying on Parkinson's, there are a lot of symptoms of Parkinson's that food and our diet can really have a positive or negative impact on. But what we eat can really help ease a lot of the symptoms of Parkinson's. Constipation is a really big one, and there are ways that we can eat to help ease constipation. So tell us more about that.

Dr. Erin Present: Yeah. Yeah. Constipation is probably the number one non-motor symptom that most people complain of in clinic. And so what can you do to really help with

that? Number one, hydration. So making sure that you're drinking enough water throughout the day is really, really important. Sometimes we misread our hunger cues. We think, "Oh, I'm hungry," but we may actually be thirsty. So if you're thinking, "Why am I hungry just an hour after I just ate?" Maybe go get yourself a glass of water and drink that. So staying hydrated is really important to that, to keeping your gut moving.

Another thing that's important is fiber. And I think a lot of people think of fiber as just being dry and ... You have to mix it in a cup of water and drink it.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Yeah. But you can get it from food.

Dr. Erin Presant: Right. You can get from all these beautiful colors that you see here.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: It's in the peels of fruit, right?

Dr. Erin Presant: Absolutely.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: And where else?

Dr. Erin Presant: We have these prunes. For some people, just eating just a couple prunes can be enough. Chia seeds have gained such popularity these days. They're found pretty much in every store and they actually have quite a bit of fiber. So you can put them in smoothies. You can sprinkle them on yogurt. You could do a lot of different things.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Make them in oatmeal.

Dr. Erin Presant: Yeah. Oatmeal's a great one.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: And a lot of people who have constipation wonder about probiotics. We can actually get probiotics, those good bacteria that we're looking for from our food.

Dr. Erin Presant: Right. Something like yogurt. There's probiotics in there. There's other sources like anything that's fermented, sauerkraut. That's a specific taste and a lot of people don't like that, but if you do, you could try it. There's a lot of other fermented vegetables these days in the stores too. Things like Kefir, which is a yogurt drink also has some great probiotics in it. And then people ask about prebiotics. Well, can I take prebiotics? Prebiotics come from the fiber in the fruits and vegetables. So you don't need to take a supplement if you're eating a lot-

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: They help feed the good bacteria and help you make a healthy gut for a healthy brain.

Dr. Erin Presant: That's right.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Yeah. And it's a common theme too among eating. And what dieticians and doctors will say is, go to your food first. Try to get your nutrients and vitamins

from a varied diet. Again, back to that rainbow, the variety. Getting all of your nutrients from your food rather than turning first to a supplement or a pill.

On the symptoms of Parkinson's, but also symptoms a lot of us experience, smell loss is a really big one. And it's so important for helping us experience food. It's important for how we taste food and how we interact, but a lot of people experience smell loss and it affects their desire to eat or what they want to eat. So help us learn how we can use our diet to get around some of that smell loss.

Dr. Erin Presant: Yeah. I've had many people tell me that, "Gosh, I just don't want to eat that much anymore because it doesn't taste like anything, but it's really coming from that smell loss." So there are a few things that you can do. Making your plate beautiful, making it something that you want to eat. And that means something different for everybody. Look at this bowl of pineapple and raspberries there. It's beautiful. There's a lot of colors.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Eat with your eyes first.

Dr. Erin Presant: Right. You're going to be drawn to that and want to eat it more, even if it doesn't taste exactly the way it used to. Another thing that you can do is create textures on top of food so the chia seeds are great for that, or even those hemp seeds there. Nuts are really good for that as well. You can sprinkle them on top of food and you get a little bit of crunchiness and a little bit of extra texture. Making eating a social event, eat with family, eat with friends. So the food doesn't become necessarily the centerpiece of what you're doing. It's actually a social interaction, which is also really important, well, for everybody.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Yeah. A lot of people will say that they make the meal an event. So it might be talking about the last time you made this casserole or how your grandma prepared it for you and what an important and special time that was, or even learning about the different foods and where they come from and bringing that aspect into, again, making meals more of just not just eating mindlessly in front of the television, but really having a discussion and connection with other people. I don't want to leave out spices because that's a real big one where it can help if you have smell loss, but many spices also add health benefits.

Dr. Erin Presant: That's right. Spices are super important. And they're so beautiful, so they do add to that color of your dish. And you may require a little bit more chili powder if your sense of smell is decreased, but you will get a sense of these spices too when you mix them into your food. So if you have smell loss, exploring new spices is a great way to do it. And then there are additional anti-inflammatory benefits of things like turmeric and some other spices Cumin. Yeah. Cumin and cinnamon.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Garlic, onion.

Dr. Erin Presant: Yeah.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Those are good things to add too. Yeah. And even just good old hot sauce, a lot of people will say adds that little kick that they can actually taste and experience.

Dr. Erin Present: Yeah. You could even go with the fresh jalapenos for more spice.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: And fiber too, I assume.

Dr. Erin Present: Yeah. Yeah. There you go. In the skin.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Yeah. What would you say to people who might not be sure how to get started?

Dr. Erin Present: Yes. Start slow. Pick a small goal. If you haven't eaten a vegetable in a week, then the goal should be to try to eat a vegetable today. And it doesn't matter which one. Choose whatever you think you're going to eat. That's the most important part. And if you reach your goal, make sure you recognize it for yourself because that'll keep you motivated and going.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: So start small, make little changes that you can sustain and that you can build on. That's right. But have fun. Experiment, learn as we talked about.

Dr. Erin Present: Bring other people into your goals too.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Erin, thank you so much for being here today. We talked about so much. We gave our audience a lot of really good information and tips and we really appreciate your time and your expertise.

Dr. Erin Present: Thank you so much.

Dr. Rachel Dolhun: Diet, as I said, is a way of life, and it's a powerful tool for boosting our brain health, helping our mood and our energy, and also managing symptoms of disease like Parkinson's. Take small steps, keep at it, and remember that any positive change is a good one. You can find more information, tips, and even recipes in our free guide at [michaeljfox.org/dietguide](http://michaeljfox.org/dietguide).

Speaker 1: Thanks for listening. Looking for a specific topic not covered in today's episode, all SCMD blogs and videos are available for free at [michaeljfox.org](http://michaeljfox.org).

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