

Military OneSource Podcast — How to Fuel Your Mental and Physical Health

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the military OneSource Podcast.

Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life.

For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. I want to introduce today's guests by first explaining why we have them on the podcast and maybe why we do this podcast at all.

It's to support the warrior ethos. We support the warfighter and the family with resources that foster well-being, readiness and build community. At Military OneSource, we're providing military community support, infrastructure and programs wherever they're needed, at home, abroad.

And if you look back at our previous episodes, and subscribe while you're at it, you'll see that in every episode we're sustaining and building effective and efficient military and family support and partnerships. So we're addressing existing and emerging needs within our military community.

So the need that we're talking about today is pretty basic. It's fundamental. It's eating well. Healthy body, healthy mind.

So for the military community that does two things, when the family is healthy, it's one less thing to be a distraction for a warfighter. So they can focus on the mission. And for the warfighter, it's even more direct. They have demanding jobs. And every day around the world, a warfighter who is fit to fight is able to carry out the mission.

So food is about as fundamental as it gets. So we're going to talk about eating well today.

And with that, we'll bring in our guests. Today we are pleased to welcome two active-duty registered dietitians. Air Force 1st Lieutenant Rebekah Suggs is joining us from Nellis Air Force Base and Army Capt. Felecia Dispense is from Fort Moore.

Welcome to the both of you.

Felecia Dispense:

Thank you.

Rebekah Suggs:

Thank you. It's good to be here.

Felecia Dispense:

Thank you, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

We are pleased to have you with us today, but it's always good to talk about food.

What I want to do to just start off is to hear your take. Each branch of the military has registered dietitians in uniform. So in your view, what is your job as it pertains to supporting the warfighter? Captain Dispense, we'll start with you. How about that?

Felecia Dispense:

Yeah, so thank you again for having me. I feel like my job as a military dietitian, it's twofold. So there's the nutrition education piece of it, but then also that nutrition advocacy.

So of course, we help to educate the warfighters and their unit leaders on what appropriate nutrition looks like. But then we also advocate in the same respect when it comes to the nutrition environment on the installation, as well as we conduct nutrition research to ensure that we are providing the best care. Making sure that it's up-to-date, and then we're also meeting the demands of future warfare, whatever that may look like.

Bruce Moody:

All right. And Lieutenant Suggs, what is your view on this?

Rebekah Suggs:

Yeah, so I really have my eye on two things as a dietitian in the military. The first really is building my skills in the hospital so that when I do deploy, I'm ready to feed patients and help promote recovery in those deployed locations. Especially as Captain Dispense was saying, we don't know what the future of warfare is going to be, and so being ready to handle anything is very important.

And then that second piece is really helping the current force stay fit to fight and eat food in a way that promotes a strong body and healthy mind. So we're looking at the present and also looking forward to the future.

Bruce Moody:

Alrighty, so let's get into it. There are dietary guidelines that tell us what foods and how much of them we should be eating each day. So what would our targets be for these fruits and vegetables?

Felecia Dispense:

Yeah, so the general recommendation going off of the MyPlate initiative is to fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables. And then also vary those up, so get a good variety of colorful fruits

and vegetables in your diet. So that was about two and a half cups of vegetables or two cups of fruits per day.

Bruce Moody:

So how are we doing with that? How well does the average adult meet these guidelines?

Felecia Dispense:

Well-

Bruce Moody:

That's okay. We don't mind being judged.

Felecia Dispense:

No judgment, but not that well. But I do feel, as a population, that we have become a lot more health conscious depending on whether or not that's in good direction or not.

But our nutrition environment doesn't always set us up to succeed either. We have a lot of convenient options that are not always the most balanced, so they're really calorie or energy-dense without a lot of nutrients.

So while it's not that well, I do feel we're moving in a good direction as a population.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. All right, we can go with that.

Now, why would it be so important for warfighters to meet these recommendations? And I know you were talking about this briefly, but maybe talk about both the unique physical and mental demands. Lieutenant Suggs, you want to try it, get a go at that?

Rebekah Suggs:

So it is absolutely vital for us to eat these fruits and vegetables. I think we all think about reasons why we eat, right? We eat because we're hungry, or maybe because something looks tasty.

Fruits and vegetables have the necessary vitamins and minerals that we need in order for our bodies to work well. I think a really classical example is scurvy. If you don't get your vitamin C, you get scurvy. And so they are absolutely essential for our bodies to work and heal well.

I think the other piece too that I'm always talking to people about is fiber, and fruits and vegetables contain a of it. So when we get that fiber, it feeds our microbiome and all of those bacteria help decrease inflammation in the body. They help with mood, they help with your immune system.

And so while you may not look at a carrot or an avocado and think that it's going to give you all of these life-sustaining capabilities, it actually really contributes to the overall health and fitness of a person.

Bruce Moody:

Now what if we look at the mental side of things? Let's talk about mood, focus, stress management, especially when we're in the middle of deployments or training, high-stress times. What are the benefits of eating well during these times?

Felecia Dispense:

The fruits and vegetables, like she was just saying, they have so many of our nutrients, specifically our micronutrients as well as antioxidants, and those fully support our brain health and mood.

So for example, things like folate, vitamin K, betacarotene, those have been shown to prevent depression, dementia, and insomnia. And let's face it, we're all a little bit sleep-deprived in the military. Other things like vitamin B6 in bananas helps to produce a serotonin and dopamine, which are two neurotransmitters that affect our mood.

Again, going back to antioxidants, berries are just chock-full of really potent antioxidants that help protect against oxidative stress, which also can contribute to mood disorders or dampen the immune system.

So overall, I would say if you're eating well, you're going to feel a lot better. And the better you feel, the more productive you're going to be, the more focused you are. The more capable you're going to be with handling the stressors of the military environment.

Bruce Moody:

Question for the both of you and maybe Lieutenant Suggs, we'll start with you. But can you recall a time when you saw a warfighter take ownership of their health and nutrition after you provided them with guidance? What did it look like to you?

Rebekah Suggs:

Absolutely. I have the privilege of getting to interact one-on-one with military members and warfighters and their families, and talking to them about health behavior modifications that we can do.

And so I've seen people literally make even the small adjustment of adding a yogurt to their breakfast or making sure they're having berries for lunch. And these small changes really make big effects in terms of how successful someone feels, but then also how interested they are in eating other healthy foods or even exercising more.

Or a lot of times what we work on is adding in those fruits and vegetables during the day and then the sugar cravings that they've been fighting so much at night dissipate because they're getting what they need during the day.

So there's definitely been a lot of success that I've seen with people that I've talked to who have really worked, not really concentrating too hard on what to get rid of, but really making an effort to include more of those nutrient-dense foods that make a big difference.

Bruce Moody:

Captain Dispense, did you have any examples that you wanted to share?

Felecia Dispense:

Oh yes, absolutely. And I love what Lieutenant Suggs just said about focusing less on what to take out and incorporating more of what you want to add in. That's so important.

For me, I can give you an example of a service member that I just worked with recently. So for her, she, active-duty soldier, mom of four kids, and she was really struggling for quite a while with her postpartum weight.

Obviously, sleep deprivation. Also, postpartum depression or was really frustrated with her lack of progress and her chronically low energy levels. So for her nutrition and her mentality prior to me working with her was that less is better, so less food, less carbs and she would get where she wanted to be.

But after I spent a significant amount of time working with her and providing her with both the nutrition education and the counseling, which is so, so important when we're trying to make any kind of behavior change with nutrition, she did start to see the results. And she saw them very quickly.

So not just with her results for her body composition, but also with her mood, her energy levels and her ability to cope with all of the stressors both with the military and with her home life with her kids and her family.

And she was able to do that and take credit because she was able to take everything that I told her, trust me through the process and fully commit to the process of having a well-balanced diet to meet her goals.

Bruce Moody:

So I'm a retired Navy chief, which means I was one of these young guys rushing into the mini-mart to get something for breakfast. You've seen us, it's not easy. But maybe you've got some advice for people who are, they're in a rush because the military is demanding a lot from them. And they're in a rush, they're on a tight budget. What would be your advice for getting them on a good nutritional track?

Felecia Dispense:

So we're all busy, right? And I'm no stranger to the shopettes either, but I think the key thing here is planning ahead. We all know we're busy. We know what's coming up the next week right. So taking that little bit of time over the weekend or whenever you have that downtime to plan ahead is so, so important.

So that can look like meal planning. It could look like meal prepping. And no, that does not have to be 20 Tupperware containers full of chicken and rice. There's ways you can get after it for what makes sense to you.

I also, in terms of planning ahead, is we go and buy the fruits and vegetables and let's face it, they're not that cheap right now. But taking the time to prepare them before you shove them into the refrigerator is going to save you a lot of time and money in the long run.

And if you really do need to go through the shopette, that's totally fine. There's a lot of good healthy options that have fruits, vegetables, good protein sources. So there's areas to look for in the shopette that can steer you in a more nutrient-dense direction versus the not to hate on the tomatoes, but that's the army standard. There's things you can get in a quick pinch.

Bruce Moody:

Right, right.

Lieutenant Suggs, I wonder if you could share any tips that you have for folks who want to get the most bang from their buck, maybe nutrition-wise?

Rebekah Suggs:

Yes, absolutely.

So I think Captain Dispense really nailed it when she was talking about how you really need to plan ahead. You can't eat the food that you don't have in the house in the first place. So really making sure that when you are shopping, you ask yourself what fruits and vegetables am I getting?

I think the other thing that I do a lot is to try to get those fruits and vegetables that don't require a lot of preparation. So berries, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, apples, oranges, those things you literally can just grab out of the fridge and go. Those are life changers for me. They have these cute little lunchbox peppers that they sell in the store that you can literally just dip in your hummus and go, they're just wonderful.

So yeah, make it as easy as possible. You do not have to get into like, "Oh, I have to cut up all of this lettuce and I got to cut up all these things and make sure I have the perfect looking salad that I saw on Pinterest." That's great if you have the time for that. But if you're really just in a pinch, being able to get those fruits and vegetables that don't require a lot of prep, you can just grab, is a really great way to go.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. Nice. I'm going to make a note to do that.

So when we start talking about eating, well, a term that comes up a lot is eating seasonally. So let's talk a little bit about really what that means and maybe why it's good for us.

Rebekah Suggs:

Yeah, this is something that's really dear to my heart. Before I became a dietician, I was an organic farmer, so I am very tied to the seasons. And honestly, eating seasonally really just means that you're eating the food that naturally grows in your region during that time of year.

So generally, depending on where you are, but generally things like strawberries grow in the spring, think of tomatoes for the summer and then things like brussels sprouts and kale can really grow in the spring or the fall. Everything has its season that it grows best in.

Obviously, you have those great states like Florida and California that have really great growing seasons, but usually you can find the food in your area that just naturally grows during those specific times of the year.

Bruce Moody:

I'm going to take a chance here and maybe talk about things I'm not quite clear about. So let's talk about phytochemicals and antioxidants and maybe I should just stop there and let you guys take over.

Rebekah Suggs:

Please go. So phytochemicals are awesome. They are so neat. They're the plant's natural defense mechanisms, and they're really cool because they're linked with the plant's color. So for example, tomatoes have a red phytochemical called lycopenes and raspberries and blueberries are loaded with one called anthocyanins, which it kind of ranges in that red to blue to purple color.

So the more the plant, the more that fruit or vegetable is grown in a sustainable way that takes advantage of its natural defense mechanisms against disease and pests, the more phytochemicals it has. And those phytochemicals are protector for the plant, but then they work like antioxidants in our bodies to help fight things like cancer and chronic inflammation.

So they're really just these powerhouse of health that it's not on the nutrition facts label, but it's right there in front of us in the color of the plant. So look for those colors.

Bruce Moody:

All right, will do.

Let's go back to eating seasonally. And what I want to get into is how eating in sync with the season can improve energy levels, immune function and especially recovery. When we're training real hard, your body needs to recover. And so let's talk about staying in sync with the seasons.

Rebekah Suggs:

Yes. So one of the pieces of staying in sync with the seasons is really that you're eating the fruits and vegetables that are loaded with phytochemicals and vitamins and minerals and fiber.

So these are really different from what we might see that's prepackaged and processed and not really seasonal at all. Right? In those grocery store shelving areas. Like ramen noodles does not have a season. It is always ever-present.

So when you're thinking about when you're training or you're deployed, it might feel easier to reach for something that has that long shelf life and is packaged. But then you don't get that nutrient power punch that the fruits and vegetables are offering.

So if you get those seasonal fruits and vegetables, you'll get those phytochemicals that help fight inflammation. Exercise is literally putting stress on your body to help with change. And so we need to help our body with that change and help decrease the inflammation that the exercise may cause.

The other piece, and I've mentioned this earlier, but that's the fiber in your microbiome. It really helps decrease that inflammation and help your immune system stay strong. So when we're thinking about training, we have to make sure that we're using all the calories that we get to go towards giving us that energy, resupplying the glycogen in our muscles, and really giving us the energy we need to do the training in the first place.

So, if we get those calories from foods that are just loaded with nutrients, we get such a great package of food.

Bruce Moody:

So my next question is really for the benefit of families because I'm going to ask about gardens. And I totally get it. I lived in the barracks. There was no way I was going to be gardening. There's no way any of us in the barracks going to be gardening.

But people who are a little further in their career, they may have some space, maybe even indoors where they can do some gardening. So maybe for those who have an opportunity to do something, and maybe what it is they don't even really see the potential. Talk about what the potential is for gardening in a small space.

Rebekah Suggs:

Yeah, so I think that it can be scary to start a new thing. So gardening might seem like it's very big and very difficult to do, but the thing that a farmer once told me was that plants want to grow. They want to live, they want to grow. And so all you really need to do is put some seeds in the ground and let them try.

Obviously, you can make it easier for them. So you can keep in mind the things that plants need to grow well. So things like sunlight, water and nourishment, much like humans. But the whole point is just to try and get it started.

So I like to suggest for people to grow, or even try to grow some things that are easier, rather than others. So really easy things to try to start would be things like basil or radishes, lettuce, arugula, mint or parsley. Those are all very forgiving plants that are very delicious, especially if you grow them in your house.

And you can honestly, as you're thinking about where you want to put them, you can put them anywhere that you find good sunlight and you can water them easily. So that could be a south-facing window, it could be a little planter outside, it could be in your yard.

When I lived in Tennessee, I literally just dug a spot in the yard that was sunny and put some seeds in the ground. So don't overthink it and just start with the easy ones and watch the plants do what they do best.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Have you worked with families? Have you worked with service members and family members? Any stories that you can share about gardening successes?

Rebekah Suggs:

Yeah, so actually I have worked with my neighbors here and it's actually interesting because they are military members, but the interesting piece is that we all live in the desert. So it's pretty difficult to grow things in the desert. And the one thing that they really, really helped them grow was an automatic watering system.

So it was really difficult for this family. They have two young kids, they have a dog, they're trying to do all these things and she just never had time to go outside and water the garden. And so obviously in the desert that's going to cause some difficulty.

So once they were able to get a self-timed watering system, then everything grew and she didn't have to think about it. So little things like that, there's a little bit of infrastructure that went into that, but she was ready for that next step and it just changed their whole ability to grow food in their backyard.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. So I want to ask about recipes, and I don't want the podcast to devolve into a whole bunch of recipes. But maybe just a couple simple nutritious recipes, any recommendations that you might have?

Rebekah Suggs:

I have one very simple one and it is less of a recipe and more of a way of cooking. So honestly, roasting. Roasting is the best way and most accessible way to cook I think. And it doesn't really require a whole lot of active participation.

You literally take your favorite vegetable, you chop it up into bite-sized pieces, you put a little bit of olive oil or avocado oil on it. Add some of your favorite seasoning like Mrs. Dash or Italian seasoning, Greek seasoning, even just salt and pepper if that's what you have. And then literally put it in the oven at 425 until it's soft.

Roasting that vegetable will help caramelize the sugar. So even though you're not adding any extra sugar, it brings out the sweetness, so it just tastes divine. Sometimes it can give you that little bit of crust on the outside, which is just so pleasant. And you can do it with anything, right? It's very versatile. So you can do it with carrots, broccoli beets, brussels sprouts, even cherry tomatoes. So I really love a good roast.

But Captain Dispense, do you have anything that you particularly like?

Felecia Dispense:

Well, that one is an easy one, so I completely agree. I agree with it being accessible too, it's so easy, just pick out what you like.

I'll pivot maybe to a breakfast item since we typically put the skip out on that one. I love to prepare an overnight oat. It is not hard. I'll just take Greek yogurt, one of my favorite Greek

yogurts, it's got a lot of protein in it. And then start to add in those fresh fruits, maybe some chia seeds or flax seed, anything to really bolster it up and make it more of a well-rounded breakfast.

And you can prepare those well ahead of time and grab it on the go in the morning. So that is my go-to breakfast when I'm in a pinch.

Rebekah Suggs:

That's a great idea.

Bruce Moody:

So I have another question. Maybe this is also geared more toward the families because I want to ask about farmers' markets. But I'm really interested in something called community-supported agriculture, and I've never actually used that term. I always call them CSAs.

But basically it's a subscription service and they will deliver you fresh local vegetables, which seems to me might be a really good fit for busy military families who don't have time to get out to the market as often as they would like. Really invite your thoughts on this.

Rebekah Suggs:

I love a CSA. I think they are so helpful both for the consumer and the farmer. Basically, you pay for a box of produce. And then it depends on the subscription service, sometimes it's weekly, biweekly or monthly. You go and you just pick up a box of produce and the farmer can put anything that they want to in there.

So that really encourages eating a variety of different foods, maybe that you've never heard of like kohlrabi or bok choy or celeriac, all these different cool new things to try. And then also you get to really celebrate with the farmer when they have a bumper crop of something. So if they have a lot of tomatoes to give out, you get extra tomatoes that week. So that's really incredible.

And then the other piece that I really like about it is that you get vegetables that are specific varieties that are grown for their flavor or their quality, but not necessarily their ability to ship well. Right? Because they don't need to ship well, they're just going into a box and you're going to take them home so they can just stay nice and fresh and tasty.

And so that's what the vegetable was created for. And so you really get to enjoy something fresh, something really tasty, and also help support the farmer who can move their produce as it comes in. And they don't have to rely on markets that maybe change as they go along the season.

Bruce Moody:

I just want to add along a tip to people who are looking at these CSAs, because you're going to get a lot. You're going to get a volume and sometimes it can be too much.

And you can cut the cost by just splitting up the box and the cost with a neighbor. The box shows up and you divvy it up, you divvy up the cost and you have all the food that you need for two families, because sometimes these boxes can be pretty generous.

I have a question for the both of you. We're going to put a bunch of links in the program notes so people can get more information about support that's available to them.

And I just want to mention, since we're talking about a farmer's markets and such, USDA has a very, very cool page where you can go and find a farmer's market. You can go in there and just put in your zip or your location or whatever, and it will find the farmer's markets around you and you get the hours and the directions.

But my question to the both of you is what sort of support on installation do you have and how can service members and family members get a hold of it?

Felecia Dispense:

So I'll speak for the army installation, and actually I feel like I remember a little bit from Air Force side too. There's also going to be food pantries available on the installation, and then DeCA that runs the commissary. They have a lot of really great resources. You can go on their website or use their app and they give you a lot of resources on how to put together a healthy meal.

Of course, they have sales and deals, but they also have a lot of recipes that are readily available on the website. And then they put a lot of things out in the store too, some front-facing marketing to help guide you through the store as well. So be on the lookout for the things like the Go for Green marketing materials and those green tabs on all the healthier "dietitian approved" items within the commissary.

Rebekah Suggs:

Yes, and to go with that too, the Go for Green is also available in the cafeterias too. So if you are trying to make good choices about what you're eating in the cafeteria or the DFAC, you can just look for the things that have the green label or even the yellow label and try to limit your intake of the things with the red. And that can really help.

If we're talking about food access, I do think the commissary is a great place to get started. I know we have a local program here at our commissary where you can connect with your first shirt and there are people who donate food in the commissary so that your first shirt can direct you to those donations.

There's also food banks that come onto base and deliver here at Nellis. And then we honestly, we connect with a local food bank called Three Square. They work with Feeding America, which is like a national food bank program, and they really help connect some of our military members to things like SNAP. And then also, we have WIC services here on base too.

So very important to plug into the resources that you have through your unit and through your first shirt. And just see what is out there for you locally. Because we have the food in America, right? That's the big piece of it. We have the food, we just have to make the connection.

Bruce Moody:

Mm-hmm. And Captain Dispense, you get the last word.

Felecia Dispense:

Awesome. Well, something you brought up earlier, I want to circle back to about the barracks not having gardening.

I'm actually in company command right now, and that just gave me so much food for thought, no pun intended, about how we could maybe get after changing that. And having our soldiers and our airmen put something together that's local that they can take care of and they can have ownership of.

So I would probably encourage our unit leaders to look into ways that they can probably support that in the barracks footprint for those soldiers.

Rebekah Suggs:

That's such a great idea.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. Well, if you make some headway there, get in touch with us and we'll have you back on the podcast.

Felecia Dispense:

Absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

It's been a real pleasure talking with the both of you today. I just appreciate the information and what you do for the military community. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Rebekah Suggs:

Thank you for having us.

Felecia Dispense:

Thank you, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent, excellent. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department.

If you have any questions, any comments, any recipes that you want to share with us, just go on the program notes as a link and you can send us a note.

Also, be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast, which includes YouTube. I keep forgetting to mention YouTube, but go to YouTube and search for Military OneSource.

And there we are, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.