



Your diet & your health

A LOCAL MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN was diagnosed with severe osteoarthritis and told she would need a hip replacement within three years. Determined to avoid, or postpone, this surgery, Jennifer (not her real name) spent months researching the causes of arthritis and learned that diet probably played a large role.

Based on the information she had gleaned about nutrition, she chose to move to a diet rich in produce, legumes, nuts, and seeds, while eliminating processed foods, certain grains, and most animal products. Within three weeks, her chronic pain had disappeared. Jennifer has stayed on this diet, with modifications, for several years and has remained pain-free.

Jennifer's experience points to the possibility that our genes affect how our bodies respond to food. According to S. Boyd Eaton, M.D., the human genome has changed little during the past 15,000 years. Our bodies are basically the same as those our primitive Paleolithic ancestors had. This means our bodies are adapted to perform best with a primitive diet, not our modern diets. The mismatch between what our bodies need and what we consume is a likely cause of many chronic diseases, including arthritis, heart disease, cancer, and diabetes.

The stone-age diet likely consisted of high intake of fruits and vegetables (65 percent of calories) and little dairy or grain. Fiber intake probably reached 100 grams per day. Despite our

ancestors' high intake of fat (35 percent of their energy came from fats, largely polyunsaturated), high blood pressure was nearly nonexistent. Our ancestors also ate little sodium.

According to registered dietitian Elizabeth Somer, in her book, *The Origin Diet* (Henry Holt and Company), modern Westerners consume more refined sugar in one day (20 teaspoons) than our early ancestors ate in an entire lifetime.

Certain isolated populations have developed in different ways, however, adapting to their environments for optimal survival. The Inuit, for example, historically had little access to plant foods, and developed bodies that survive best on a diet consisting primarily of animal foods. When they adopt a Western diet, disease rates skyrocket.

While some might argue that we now live longer than our cave-dwelling ancestors, it's important to remember that other factors contributed to their mortality rate, including injuries, infections and childbirth complications. These ancient threats now are easily resolved by modern medicine. Ironically, for many modern Western humans, our diets are killing us. Or, in cases like Jennifer's, contributing to the development of chronic conditions. In fact, chronic diseases affect about half of all Americans, and are striking individuals at younger and younger ages. They kill 75 percent of our population.

Decades ago, Weston Price, a dentist, researched the eating habits and health of traditional, isolated societies around the globe. He found 14 groups whose members exhibited superb health, free of the chronic diseases that plague our nation. Common factors among these groups included diets rich in animal proteins and fats, and foods eaten in their whole, unrefined states. Further research revealed that traditional diets included fermented foods that allowed more nutrients to be released and supplied beneficial bacteria to the intestines. They also cooked bone broths, which are rich in minerals and gelatin.

Food processing among these peoples involved culturing

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fruits and vegetables; soaking or even sprouting grains, nuts and seeds before cooking or dehydrating them; cooking foods slowly and at low temperatures; and creating rich bone broths. These foods and cooking methods are designed for maximum absorption and assimilation of nutrients.

The Weston Price findings on food preparation are just one option for improving one's health. Other options might include carefully combining foods, a plant-based diet, a detox diet, Ayurvedic methods of eating, a macrobiotic diet, or a pH-balancing diet. Careful research into these diets should be conducted and a consultation with a health care provider or nutritionist should be completed before starting on one. Then, watch how the body responds to see if those new choices are producing the results being sought. If not, perhaps another diet option might produce better results.

One of the best ways to determine how well a person is digesting food is to look at the end product of digestion. Optimally, stool should be passed at least once a day and should be pliable and formed, not dry and pebble-like. People who consume a lot of fiber pass stool more frequently than those on a low-fiber diet because the fiber helps move the food more quickly through the digestive tract. When digestion is prolonged, waste products accumulate in the intestines before being passed.

While improved diet has vast potential for generating better health, it isn't always a panacea. In cases like Jennifer's, a hip replacement might still be on the horizon. But her healthy diet before and after can assist with her recovery.

Other alternative methods of working with the body can also be extremely useful. Modern Western medicine can assist with diagnosing and treating health issues that might be outside the reach of alternative medicine. But one thing is certain: a healthy diet provides the right ingredients for aiding successful rejuvenation of the body.

About the author: Heidi Bright Paraless, M.Div., is a local freelance author and editor, and is the author of Hidden Voices: Biblical Women and Our Christian Heritage (Smyth & Helwys, 1998). Contact her at 513.774.9882.

