

Alberta Doctors' Digest

A chacun son gout

Trying to keep up with advances in medical practice is hard enough. Keeping up with new terminology in drugs, syndromes and therapies is, I think, near impossible. One sometimes gets a mild shock when a seemingly new term presents itself. This happened to me recently when Richard, an oncology colleague, sent round one of those email surveys – the kind you groan at, knowing it's a waste of your time coupled with an easy way for the sender to cobble together a publishable paper for the *Annual Review of Medicine*. But all he wanted to know was whether we'd heard of "ketogenic diets" and if there was interest to learn more. I answered no and yes.

I then asked my daughter, a general practitioner, if she knew about "ketogenic diets."

"Been around for years," she said. "Do you know about 'The Paleo diet'?"

I didn't. And this humiliation was compounded when chatting to Amanda, my admin assistant. She said: "My Dad's on that. He's pre-diabetic. He's doing well." And, coming out of her office one minute later, a dear oncologist colleague told me that her son would be going on a ketogenic diet and that pediatric neurologists for decades had researched its value in epilepsy. And it seems anyone listening to CBC's "White Coat, Black Art" knows about it, and many think it might be an OK way to lose weight.

When you exist in a medical sub-specialty, you can miss out on changes and innovations that generalists and family docs likely heard about some years ago. That's my excuse anyway. And if you're a champ on diets, you can stop reading and save yourself some time.

But ever since the first choo-choo train came chuffing toward my mouth with a load of dubious fodder, I've been suspicious of dietary advice. Diets have to be individualized to suit the context and character of the individual. No one size fits all.

I'm an adherent of dear old Terence (185 BC-159 AD) with his comedy titled: "*Ne quid nimis*" ("nothing in excess" or "moderation in all things"), which is a daily system of living, in older senses of the word "diet." I also like to add: "including moderation."

So "a chacun son gout." Thus, you can, from time to time, indulge guilt-free in the world-famous "Glasgow diet," a result of the inhabitants having a genetically ingrained aversion to fruit and vegetables coupled with an affinity for anything deep fried in fat. Current favorites include chips and cheese pie (french fries with gravy smothered in layers of processed cheese, the more the better, gloved in pastry) – which leaves poutine looking like a light snack – and "The Munchy Box," also known as "*the Glasgow salad*" (a thimble of coleslaw with chips, kebab meat, pizza, naan bread, chicken tikka, pakora, onion rings and much more). If you're looking for a quick cardiac exit from this mortal coil, you should look into a few years of eating the Glasgow diet. The notorious deep-fried Mars bar is now unavailable to under-fives due to spoiler nutritional education which has also decreased the incidence of coronary heart disease over the past decade by 27%.

Most people have a diet – a normal diet – which these days may consist of 45% to 60% carbohydrates. A diet, from the Greek “dieta,” was “a way of living.” It was about victuals in daily use, a system of eating. But over time its meaning has subtly shifted to imply only a prescribed system of foods as in the therapeutic diets like gluten-free diets for celiac patients or post-gastro-intestinal-surgery liquid diets.

Weight loss diets have come and gone over my career, and moderation seems sustainable and to be the centrifugal position. For weight loss, I tend to favor the Atkins diet – steak and salads – but what do I know? These days, when opining on diets, you can open a can of worms. People have such strong opinions. And then we have the geniuses of Silicon Valley, the “biohackers,” pontificating and tweeting about their latest food fad. Every dope these days can collect an army of sheep baa-baaing about an experience based on a sample size of one.

Half a century ago, there were a few vegetarians around. But vegans? I didn’t meet them until medical school. Britain and Canada in the 1960s was a world shifting slowly from post-war austerity to liberal permissiveness, and people had little time or sympathy for individual eating likes and dislikes. When the occasional anemic patient arrived on the wards announcing they were vegan, Professor Girdwood would leap into action. He had devoted his life to studying pernicious anemia and Vitamin B₁₂; on ward rounds he carefully but shyly inspected every patient’s tongue for redness and rawness to the irritation of busy residents.

Vegan? We juniors would dutifully roll our eyes; the senior residents would shake their heads and might even call for a psychiatrist. Saying you were vegan was an invitation to step into the twilight world of crack-pottery, one step away from the straightjacket. A “vegetarian” was tolerated but deemed a bit odd unless from India.

Millennials may sneer, and yet, in this age of presentism and intolerance of the past, there was a context to the idea that vegans were asking for trouble. There was no easy access to B₁₂ injections or pills, and measuring serum B₁₂ was a lengthy exercise.

Vegans are now (benefitting from pioneers in nutritional science) in a position to graze exclusively on the uncomplaining leguminous world and be listened to. One fussy firefighter even demanded animal-free protein while fighting wildfires in BC. This request was refused by the camp cook who offered vegetables with a frothy exchange of words; the said vegan refused these proffered vegetables because they’d been contaminated by hands soiled by touching meat. Vegans have become, if not mainstream, then just to one side of mainstream, and vegetarians can now enjoy equal footing when contemplating menus. It was not always so.

So shamed ignorance being the stimulus for seeking knowledge, and with the help of our dietician, Katie Keller, here are some diets (some better known, some lesser known) that you and I should know about.



These days, when opining on diets, you can open a can of worms (photo credit: Ryan McGuire, Pixabay.com)

Ketogenic

This diet reduces carbohydrate intake big-time while upping fat intake (but only “healthy” fat-containing foods: avocados, coconuts, Brazil nuts, seeds, oily fish and olive oil), which allows the body to burn fat for energy, rather than carbohydrates. Protein alternatives like tofu are limited, as are grains, starches and sugary fruits. Green veggie protein is preferred for fiber and micronutrients.

This approach leads (in about three days) to the breakdown of fat deposits thus creating ketones, which are in turn used for energy. Some experience mild malaise for a couple of weeks. There may be a small risk of ketoacidosis for people with Type 1 diabetes. There is promising value for Type 2 diabetes management but less evidence for sustained weight loss. Some patients with cancer may have heard of it from friends and family, but there’s no evidence that “starving the cancer of glucose” does anything other than depriving a person of one of the joys of life. This diet does need supervision.

Mediterranean

This is my favorite diet – for me, it’s easy to comply with (or, as we say now, “adhere to.”) It follows the nutritional habits of the enlightened folk of Greece, southern Italy, Spain and southern France, who relax in the sun discussing philosophy; it’s a way of life.

Lots of plant foods, fresh fruits as dessert, beans, nuts, whole grains, seeds, olive oil as the main source of dietary fats, and cheese and yogurts for dairy foods. The diet also includes moderate amounts of fish and poultry, up to four eggs per week, small amounts of red meat, and moderate amounts of wine.

The Mediterranean diet is the most extensively studied diet to date, with reliable research supporting its use for improving a person's quality of life and lowering cardiovascular disease risk; it may also help delay the progress of Alzheimer’s disease.

Vegetarian

Many people choose a vegetarian diet for ethical reasons, as well as health. I talked to Stewart, a colleague, who says, “My wife watched ‘Earthlings’ about how we slaughter animals. She’s experimenting with going vegan though I don’t think she’ll last. I’m trying to be a lacto-ovo-pesco-vegetarian. We all eat too much meat.”

I agreed with that. Meat once a week, fish once a week and chicken on special occasions used to be the norm. Now it’s chicken burgers alternating with hamburgers every day and night.

And there’s a new glossary of vegetarian sub-types: lacto-vegetarian, fruitarian-vegetarian, ovo-vegetarian, pesco-vegetarian etc. Most vegetarians are lacto-ovo vegetarians: no animal-derived foods, except for milk, cheese and eggs. Honey is OK.

Stewart suggested I watch “Earthlings,” a documentary about humanity’s use of animals for scientific research and as food, clothing and entertainment. The slaughter house sequences are disturbing including the brutal Kosher slaughtering of cattle portrayed in one abattoir. All human carnivores should watch this YouTube documentary or visit a slaughter house (as I have done.) You eat less meat after that.

Will we look back at the coming of Beyond Meat and Impossible Burgers and shake our heads in 50 years at today’s mass slaughter of creatures for our dining pleasures? Perhaps. Studies over the last few years have suggested that vegetarians have a lower body weight, suffer less from diseases, and have a longer life expectancy than people who eat meat, though it may just feel longer.

Vegan

Veganism is more a way of life and a philosophy than a diet. A vegan eats no animal-based grub, including eggs or dairy. Vegans do not usually adopt veganism just for health reasons, but also for environmental, ethical and compassionate reasons.

Vegans believe that modern intensive farming methods are bad for our environment and unsustainable in the long term. If everybody ate plant-based food, the environment would benefit, animals would suffer less, more food would be produced, and people would generally enjoy better physical and (apparently) mental health – so say vegans.

Weight Watchers

Weight Watchers Inc. focuses on losing weight through diet, exercise and a support network. It was started in the 1960s by a New York homemaker, Jean Nidetch, who had lost some weight but worried she might put it back on. She and a network of friends created Weight Watchers, stumbling on a brilliant money-making business with global branches and a steady cash-flow of returnees who had quickly put all their weight back on.

Paleo

Other names for the Paleo diet include the Paleolithic, stone age or hunter-gatherer diet. The idea is to return to eating like early homo sapiens (though not necessarily in the manner they scarfed) during the Paleolithic era 2.5 million to 10,000 years ago, apparently an era of advanced health and longevity. The diet’s shaky hypothesis is that the human body is genetically mismatched to the modern diet that emerged with farming

– the “discordance hypothesis” – believed to contribute to obesity, diabetes and heart disease today.

A Paleo diet includes lean meats, fish, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds – fodder obtained by hunting and gathering: grass-fed animals, wild mammoths, mountain lions and raptors. This diet limits foods that became available when farming emerged about 10,000 years ago. Fish is OK, but processed foods, spuds, salt, whisky and Twinkies are out.

The difference between the Paleo diet and other diets is the absence of whole grains and legumes, which dieticians consider good sources of fiber, vitamins and other nutrients. Also frowned on are dairy products – good sources of protein and calcium.

For some, a Paleo diet may be too expensive. And archaeological research has demonstrated that early human diets may have included wild grains as much as 30,000 years ago – well before the introduction of farming. I suspect this diet is BS, but if you have some Neanderthal genes on 23andMe, it may be worth a try.

The Bush Tucker Man Diet

Back in the late 1980s early 1990s, I loved watching ABC’s “The Bush Tucker Man,” Les Hiddins, an ex-military Aussie with a funny hat, who thrived on tasty bush food such as grubs, crunchy cockroaches and leaves. He’s still alive but has put on weight so maybe he’s off his insect protein. Worth a try if you’re out camping.

Raw food

There are four main types of raw foodists:

- raw vegetarians
- raw vegans
- raw omnivores
- raw carnivores

If you hanker after being an interesting patient, try the raw omnivore or carnivore diet. A host of micro-organismal ailments from trichinosis to tapeworms await you. Raw veggie foodism involves eating non-processed foods and drinks that are completely plant-based and organic. Raw foodies believe that at least three-quarters of a person's food intake should consist of uncooked food. This fraction has not been derived from carefully controlled studies. Is it an eating disorder?

The HCG Diet

This is an extreme diet that causes weight loss of up to one to two pounds per day. Most human chorionic gonadotrophin (HCG) products on the market are scams and don't contain any HCG. Don't do it, especially men.

A chacun son gout! Bon Appetit, mes amis! Ne quid nimis!

Thanks to Ms Katie Keller, RD, Nutrition Services, Tom Baker Cancer Centre, for dietary advice.

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