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Low Fat Diets Are Grossly Misrepresented

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For more than two decades, many commentators have discussed and cursed so-called low-fat diets and gotten away with talking nonsense. It is time to look at some facts.

Virtually all of these discussions are based on recommendations of reports of the National Academy of Sciences during the 1980s when the initial suggestion was made to reduce total dietary fat to 30 percent (from the average of 35-37 percent of calories) -- I know because I co-authored the first of these reports on diet and cancer in 1982. Then, during the next decade or so, this 30 percent benchmark became the definition of a low fat diet. A myth was born because this diet did not lead to obesity, as claimed.

During the next 10 years when this low fat myth was growing, average percent dietary fat barely changed -- maybe decreasing a couple percentage points to about 33 percent, at best. In reality, the amount of fat consumed INCREASED because total calorie consumption also increased. Furthermore, during this same period of low fat mythology (1980s-1990s), obesity incidence increased.

Now, enter Robert Atkins and other writers who argued that obesity was increasing because of our switch to low fat diets. By going low fat -- so the mythical story went -- we were consuming more carbohydrate, an energy source from plant-based foods. This was a serious misrepresentation of the facts.

By falsely blaming low fat, 'high carb' diets for the obesity crisis, these writers were then free to promote the opposite: high fat, low 'carb', high cholesterol and high protein diets rich in animal-based foods, a so-called low 'carb' diet. During the initial discussions of this 'low carb' diet, no distinction was made between the refined carbohydrates (sugar and white flour as commonly present in processed foods) and the natural carbohydrates almost exclusively present in plant-based foods.

Later, some attention was given to refined carbohydrates (sugar, white flour) as a contributor to obesity, but by then the damage due to this obfuscation had been done. 'Carbs' were out, protein and fat were in. By initially demonizing 'carbs' and so-called 'low fat' diets and emphasizing increased protein and fat consumption, the intended path was clear: consume a diet rich in animal-based foods instead of a diet rich in plant-based foods.

Obesity continues to climb but not because of a switch to a plant-foods rich diet naturally low in fat and high in carbohydrate (TOTAL carbohydrate, that is). Rather, obesity increases as physical activity decreases and as sugary, fatty, salty processed food consumption increases.

More serious, however, is the effect that this mythology has had on suppressing information on the extraordinary health value of diets that are truly low in fat (10-12 percent). I am referring to a whole foods, plant-based diet that avoids added fat and processed and animal-based foods. This diet contains about 10-12 percent fat, sometimes pejoratively referred to as "extremely low fat". Call it what you will, but this diet (also low in total protein, about 8-10 percent) produces, by comparison, "extremely low" incidences of sickness and disease. In fact, it now has been shown not just to prevent these illnesses but to treat them. Importantly, this dietary lifestyle cannot be dismissed by the mythological argument that so-called low fat diets have been proven to be questionable.

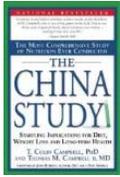
Professional medical researchers and practitioners also repeat this same mantra as if it is real. It has been shown for example in the very large Nurses' Health Study at Harvard over an observation period of at least 14 years that reducing dietary fat from about 50 percent to about 25 percent of total calories has no association with breast cancer rates. Based on this and related studies, the sole manipulation of fat within this range does little or nothing when the diet still contains such high proportions of animal based and processed foods. Total protein remains very high throughout this range and worse, the proportion of protein from animal-based sources, already high when fat is high, if anything, increases even more when fat is independently decreased.

It is time that we seriously consider the health benefits of a whole food, plant based diet, which is naturally low in total fat, animal-based protein, and refined carbohydrates but rich in antioxidants and complex carbohydrates. The health benefits that are now being reported for this dietary lifestyle are unmatched in scope and magnitude of effect. It is time to discard the gibberish about low fat diets being responsible for the obesity epidemic. This demonizing of low fat diets does not apply to whole food plant-based diets, even lower in fat, because this dietary lifestyle really works. Just try it, but stay with it long enough to allow your body to overcome your taste preferences for fat that arise from its addictive nature.

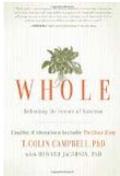
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