

How Does My Diet Impact My Health and Longevity?

For many of us, the foods we enjoy the most are the worst for our health. Consider your diet. What foods do you prefer to eat? How many of the following foods do you consume in a week?

- Red meats
- Processed meats
- Pre-packaged foods
- Processed foods
- Excessive added sodium
- Refined sugars
- High-fructose corn syrup (HFCS)
- Trans-fats and other unhealthy fats
- Excessive amounts of alcohol

None of these foods and food ingredients are particularly harmful to a person's health in small, infrequently consumed amounts, but the Standard American Diet (SAD) is a consistent style of regular, daily food choices and consumption habits that aggravates some chronic conditions and causes other hard-to-shake disorders that can easily be lethal.

The Standard American Diet contributes to chronic illness through many biological processes, but two of the most impactful are obesity and systemic inflammation. A diet that causes or sustains systemic inflammation does serious harm to a person's health, making them more vulnerable to severe illnesses, like cardiac disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and kidney disorders.

Often, these chronic disorders co-occur, multiplying the harm caused by poor food choices in a cascade effect. For example, consider that a diet full of sugar, unhealthy fats, and refined carbohydrates causes a person to become obese. The excess weight makes it harder to exercise, leading to a more sedentary lifestyle, which worsens the effects of excessive sugar and fat intake.

Most eating habits that cause prolonged systemic inflammation also lead to obesity, which is a serious co-morbidity in all the aforementioned disorders.

Diets that cause or sustain systemic inflammation are known to cause and/or contribute to [dangerous disorders](#) such as:

- Obesity
- High blood pressure
- Stroke
- Cardiovascular diseases, including coronary artery disease
- Type II diabetes
- Metabolic syndrome
- Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease

Obesity increases the risk of these disorders by elevating the level of chronic systemic inflammation throughout the body. Systemic inflammation causes a low but constant release of chemicals in the body that put cumulative stress on all cells and tissues, eventually [causing organ damage](#).

As an illustration of how poor nutrition can affect several major body systems at once, let's look at how a diet that's high in unhealthy fats and salt can lead to heart disease, high blood pressure, and kidney disease, all at the same time.

Over time, as a person eats too many salty, fat-laden meals, blood vessels accumulate deposits of cholesterol. The immune system attacks these fat deposits, causing the arteries to become [inflamed](#). The inflammatory process causes blood vessels throughout the body to become more susceptible to developing clots of [fatty plaque](#).

As inflammation increases, arteries become stiff and fragile, which makes them vulnerable to rupturing during episodes of high blood pressure.

In this case, high blood pressure accompanies clogged arteries because diets that are overloaded in fat also tend to be too high in sodium, which leads to the body retaining water to ensure the blood's mineral levels stay balanced. Excess fluid elevates a person's blood pressure, which puts even more stress onto the arteries that are inflamed and clogged with fat.

The [kidneys](#) are also harmed in this situation, as they're overworked in a constant, losing battle to excrete high volumes of sodium

As you can see, too much fat and sodium directly harm both the cardiovascular system and the kidneys, greatly increasing the risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, chronic kidney disease, and stroke.

What Determines Whether a Diet is Healthy or Not?

The biggest impact our diet and daily nutritional habits have is on our health and well-being. By observing people who live in the famed [Blue Zones](#) around the world, where the percentage of people living to be 100—or even older—is high, we can draw some conclusions.

Living a long, healthy life is associated with overall eating patterns that are:

- Based primarily on consuming healthy plant-based foods. Diets that rely on fruits, grains, legumes, and vegetables for most of their daily calories are associated with far lower levels of cardiac disease and type II diabetes.
- Filled with whole foods, with no heavily processed foods
- Have little added sugar and no added salt
- Low on meat consumption, with fish being the most common kind of meat consumed
- Full of varied and balanced food choices

These eating habits are all associated with markedly lower rates of:

- Cardiovascular disease

- Diabetes
- Hypertension
- Kidney disease
- Obesity

Everyone can add years of active, healthy living to their lives by including more vegetables, fruits, nuts, and beans to their diet. Reducing one's daily intake of red meat, eliminating heavily processed foods, and lowering their consumption of sodium and sugar is also an essential part of living a longer, healthier life.

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