

Beyond Food Fads

In the arena of healthy eating, there are oftentimes contradictory claims made by different schools of thought which, of course, leads to much confusion amongst the public trying to find their way through the maze of brand name diets and food ideologies. Against this backdrop, this article explores two seemingly opposite yet popular food trends - the Paleolithic diet and vegetarianism - with a view to breaking through to principles of healthy eating that lay beyond the pale of diet denominations.

Vegetarianism



Vegetarianism is a relatively established eating way characterized, not so much by the eating of vegetables as the name would imply, but by the abstention from most (if not all) animal flesh and animal products. There are categories of vegetarianism based on the degree to which animal and animal products are omitted from consumption. For example:

LACTO-VEGETARIANS - they allow dairy products (milk, cheese) into their diet. ('Lacto' is derived from lactose, the sugar found in cow's milk.) Ironically, they say no to the biggest dairy product – cows!

SEMI-VEGETARIANS or FLEXITARIANS -Those allow themselves to periodically eat animal flesh from chicken, fish and other non-mammalian sources.

VEGANS – These are your hardcore vegetarians. They suffer no involvement with animal flesh. Some of the strictest of these types reject cooked food and may even limit themselves to eating only the products of the plant kingdom that can be gathered without harming the plant (fruits, nuts, and seeds).

The Paleolithic Diet



The Paleolithic or 'paleo' diet is an eating way based on the idea that the proper diet for humans mimic as much as possible the mode of eating that existed prior to agriculture. This would be the diet of our hunter-gatherer ancestors who ate wild meat and a wide variety of vegetation including roots, tubers, leaves, and fruit.

Excluded from this diet are grains, legumes, dairy, processed starches, processed proteins, refined sugars and mostly anything that did not exist prior to the advent of agriculture 10000 years ago.



The reasoning is that the last 10000 years is too short a time within our evolutionary history for our bodies to adapt to the changes wrought by agricultural practices.

For example, the domestication of animals like the cow brought with it the consumption of milk but at this point, as much as 75 % of the world's population is lactose intolerant.

Similarly, the intake of grains and beans skyrocketed after the domestication of these crops by early farmers. According to paleo adherents, contemporary research shows the unmistakable presence of anti-nutrients in grains and legumes that are implicated as contributing factors in several disease processes. Widespread wheat allergies and gluten-intolerance, they claim, are just the tip of the evidentiary iceberg.

The paleo eater also typically goes out of his/her way to get grass fed or hunted meat rather than the commercial grain-fed meat.

Which One Is Better?

Without delving into greater details, we can begin to see the broad areas of contention and agreement:

The winners in this debate are veggies (including roots and tubers), fruits, and nuts. Both sides like them. Mainstream nutritionists also concur that generous consumptions of vegetables fruit and nuts are beneficial to health.

Thank goodness for this tiny consensus! At least it provides CLARITY.

Another consensus that can be reached by both paleos and vegetarians is that inhumanely-raised mass produced grain-fed meat which are shot full of hormones and antibiotics are not fit for consumption.

So, the major area of disagreement seems to be about sourcing righteous protein: Vegetarians get their protein intake largely from grains and legumes and believe animals to be the source of chronic disease while paleos insist that wild, grass-fed meat and wild-caught fish are superior sources of protein and blame over-the-top consumption of grains and legumes for chronic disease.

In their defense, Paleos will break out the data highlighting the nutritional bona fides of their protein source. The stats reveal that grass-fed or wild meat is lower in total fat and calories while having significantly higher percentages of the 'good' fats such as omega 3 fatty acid than their grain-fed counterparts. (Note: these 'good fats' are so called because of the correlation between amounts present in diet and lowered risk of heart disease, inflammation as well as a host of other diseases).

Wild caught fish and grass-fed meat also outshine grain and legumes as a protein source not only in their omega 3 profile but in the vitamin and trace mineral profile as well.



The Inuit (formerly known as Eskimos), a collection of different groups of hardcore hunter-gatherers living in the agriculturally-challenged arctic regions are an example of people whose traditional diet was high in animal fat and protein while being devoid of grains and legumes. Prior to western acculturation, they were reported to have a low incidence of auto-immune disease, cancer, and heart disease. With acculturation, the prevalence of said diseases is on the increase approaching Western levels.

Vegetarians, on the other hand, contend that if legumes and grains are so bad then why is it that an examination of populations renowned for health and longevity consistently reveal patterns of food intake featuring high percentages of grains and legumes.

An outstanding example is the Okinawans of Japan:

This population was studied over a period of 25 years because they have one of the longest average life spans and greatest number of centenarians in the world as well as one of the lowest mortality rates from many chronic diseases including cancer, heart disease, osteoporosis, and stroke.

Their traditional food intake is 80 percent plant-based consisting of plenty of whole grains, soy, and plenteous servings of vegetables and fruits per day. In addition, they eat seaweed, fish and other seafood at least three times a week. On occasion, they eat pork, poultry, beef, and eggs.

Interestingly, Okinawans who have strayed from their traditional path and into more westernized diets tend to reap similar consequences as westerners.

Other populations that show this correlation between health, longevity and significant grain and legume intake include people from Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Ikaria, Greece; and the Seventh Day Adventists in Loma Linda, California, who live in the so-called the "Blue Zones."

Conclusion – Beyond food isms

As a general matter, we can conclude that good health is accessible on an omnivorous dietary regimen weighted toward plant-based consumption.

In fact, according to overwhelming scientific evidence, throughout our evolutionary history, we have had a digestive tract that has been able to digest fruits, nuts, and meat without the need for specialized adaptation. In other words, over the eons, we have been working with a gut designed for omnivores.

This does not mean that a vegan diet, for example, might not be the best remedy to counter the ill-effects of a chronic life-long meat-and-potatoes/fast-food diet. In such cases however, the vegan diet is being prescribed for a particular condition rather than being touted as a one-size-fit-all standard diet for all people.

...which brings us to the other major take-away: there is no one-ideal -diet-for-all-people.



Our bodies have layers upon layers of evolutionary histories ranging from ancient adaptations that are common to all presently living *homo sapiens sapiens* to more recent adaptations over the last 10k years which differ from person to person based on geographic, climatic, cultural and genetic factors:

Prehistoric adaptations in our human progenitors evolved the basic omnivorous dietary template which we all seem to share while recent changes have, for example, enabled some people (presumably with deep cattle herding ancestry) to digest the milk of cows.

The key is to eat in a way that is compatible with one's unique biochemistry. This requires us to attune to our body because it will provide cues as to what does and doesn't work.

Unfortunately, for a lot of us, our internal guidance systems are out of whack.

Perhaps this is an under-rated factor in poor health and nutrition. Nutritionists and weight loss experts too often narrow their focus to all kinds of food intake permutations and combinations without paying attention to the restoration of our ability to listen and respond to the messages that our body is sending us.

In this regard it is important to distinguish between hunger and appetite: hunger is the body's signal that it needs food whereas appetite is a mental/emotional desire for food that ideally accompanies hunger but often is present when our hunger has been satisfied. Therefore- in addition to a conscious, informed food intake - a healthy eating plan utilizes techniques that cultivate an effective mind-body relationship so that we

- 1) Eat for physiological rather than psychological reasons and
- 2) become adept at interpreting the body's cues to distinguish beneficial responses to food from adverse ones.

The previously mentioned people of Okinawa have a traditional lifestyle that supports psychological and spiritual health. This is probably as great a factor in their health and longevity as is their food intake.

They are known to engage in daily physical activity such as gardening, traditional dance and martial arts well into their old age, all of which contribute to a general sense of wellbeing; they tend to respond to events that occur in life with an adaptable, easygoing optimistic attitude; they nourish family and community bonds by maintaining a vital schedule of social engagement and they live purpose-filled lives.

An optimal eating plan can have different starting points. If a vegan, paleo, or any other kind of diet works for you then there is no problem. However, we must be sufficiently attuned to detect when we are experiencing a failure to thrive on our chosen dietary regimen.



It is helpful to view diet appropriateness within the context of personal growth; this suggests a continuum that correlates modes of eating to stages along the pathway to spiritual maturity.

It may well be that as we approach the pinnacle of personal development our diet will tend to shift from an omnivorous to an herbivorous modality in a natural effortless progression where we experience the loss of desire for certain foods like animal flesh and a corresponding increase in desire for fruits and vegetables. Such are the possibilities when we regain the capacity to listen to our bodies.

I think it is a mistake to carry an overly dogmatic approach to crafting a sustainable reasonable eating plan. Lose the isms and wear your food philosophy lightly, as a guidepost, rather than as a heavy burdensome dogma.