Paleo Pointers

What's so bad about eating good?

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Paleo diets don't include processed or packaged foods. Instead, you dine on whole foods, lean proteins, fruits and veggies, and healthy fats. But the diet also eliminates a couple of key foods, namely, grains and legumes. Some nutritionists think this eating plan is controversial. But others consider it a basic approach to healthy eating that can help boost the amount of nutrients we get each day.

When our hunter-gatherer ancestors lived in caves and prepared their meals from fish caught in a nearby stream or a woolly mammoth they hunted in the wild, they might have garnished the meal with a few berries from an uncultivated bush. Back then, meat and plant foods were pretty much the only items on the menu.

But, today, if you follow the so-called "caveman diet," a.k.a. the Paleo diet, your hunt for food would more likely require you to stroll through supermarket aisles trying to figure out what modern foods meet these dietary requirements and qualify to be dropped into your shopping cart.

While the Paleo diet isn't as old as the Paleolithic period (which inspired the food plan and is also the period when man first began to shape tools), this way of eating is nothing new. The diet plan espouses eating foods that Paleolithic man would have hunted, fished for or gathered. It includes meat, fish, shellfish, poultry, eggs, vegetables, roots, fruits, seeds, berries, and healthy fats from raw nuts, avocados, and coconut, olive and fish oils.

Absent from the list are heavily processed oils such as canola and soybean, salt, sugar, artificial flavors, colors, sweeteners and preservatives, corn syrup, legumes, all grains and dairy. In addition, Paleo diet devotees don't drink alcohol, or they'll only imbibe minimal amounts of spirits as well as caffeine.

This current eating trend was popularized by the book The Paleo Diet by Loren Cordain, PhD. He based it on the premise that we are genetically predisposed to eating the way our ancient ancestors did. Cordain theorized that because of our genes, our bodies aren't able to metabolize foods that developed as a result of the agricultural revolution.

But detractors of the Paleo diet attack its principles on two fronts: that modern humans are no longer cave-dwellers, and that health concerns crop up with any fad diet. Also, scientifically speaking, it's impossible to pinpoint exactly what kind of diet our Paleolithic ancestors followed, and many of the plants and animals consumed are either extinct or have evolved over time. Today, wild game is not readily available, and most animals we eat are domesticated, bred and farmed for food. In addition, plant foods are also processed. As for our metabolism, humans genetically adapt to eating foods that are readily available in their environments. What ancient man ate would vary by region, environment and customs, just as the Paleo diet itself has been modified through the years.

In general, many nutritionists agree that eating whole foods, lean proteins, fruits, vegetables and healthy fats while avoiding processed foods makes sense. But many of these same experts don't agree that the unavailability of certain foods during the Paleolithic period, such as dairy products, means these foods aren't beneficial to our health. Indeed, people can experience nutritional deficiencies when they eliminate whole groups of food from their diets. What's more, besides robbing us of necessary nutrients, this restrictive way of eating can be difficult to maintain.

Besides their concern about the Paleo diet excluding entire food groups, nutritionists also find fault with this food plan for its emphasis on eating meat. Critics say this way of eating can result in high cholesterol levels, heart disease and cancer.

"In general, there are numerous pros and cons to consuming meat," says Emily Dionne, a registered dietitian and co-author of The Spicy Paleo Cookbook. "In my opinion what really matters most is what sources of meat a person consumes. High-fat red meats, dark poultry meat and cured meats, such as bacon and sausage, are all sources of protein that we could do without. These processed meats are all high in unhealthy, saturated fats—the fats that increase levels of low-density lipoproteins, or LDL, the 'bad' cholesterol in our blood—and over time can lead to atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, that ultimately can lead to cardiovascular disease."

More recent versions of the Paleo diet emphasize lean sources of protein, which can actually contribute to weight loss. What's more, since protein and fiber from fresh produce are filling, this might make followers of these meal plans less likely to binge.

"Lean, low-saturated-fat meats are perfectly healthy components of a well balanced diet and provide a number of beneficial nutrients," Dionne says. "Extra-lean ground beef and white-meat poultry, for example, are high-quality sources of protein, iron, B vitamins, zinc, magnesium and vitamin E."

Still, even too much lean protein can result in excess saturated fat intake. "Portion control and moderation are key," she adds.

Another criticism of the Paleo diet is the renunciation of dairy foods that's required. "Consuming adequate amounts of calcium and vitamin D is crucial to maintaining healthy bones and preventing conditions such as osteoporosis," says Dionne. "I agree that low-fat dairy products are

an excellent source of these key nutrients. Dairy provides even more health benefits from its content of additional nutrients, such as potassium, magnesium, phosphorous and protein. This is why the Paleolithic diet is by no means right for everyone."

Indeed, no single diet is perfect for everyone. That said, there are some who do benefit from eating a more Paleo-oriented diet. For those who choose to follow this diet plan, or people who must avoid certain foods because of health or medical reasons, it's still necessary to consume adequate amounts of key vitamins and minerals, such as calcium and vitamin D, from alternative sources they can tolerate.

Most nutritionists agree that the legumes and whole grains, such as beans and steel-cut oats, that the original version of the Paleo diet rules out, are very healthy foods when they're eaten in moderation.

"Whole grains and legumes are rich in nutrients, are excellent sources of dietary fiber and may help reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes," Dionne says. "That's why I support the need for incorporating variety and diversity into any 'diet' or particular pattern of eating."

Dionne doesn't believe in any version of the Paleo diet that's highly restrictive, limiting or unrealistic (not to mention unhealthy). "The premise of the diet itself is quite sound and serves as the perfect framework for 'clean eating,'" she says. "To follow its 'rules' to strict extremes is neither necessary nor beneficial."

In a nutshell, key Paleo diet principles—namely, eating lean proteins, fruits, vegetables and healthy fats—are important components of well-balanced nutrition. But whole grains, legumes and dairy also play a key role.

"In their natural, unprocessed forms, nutrient-rich grains such as oatmeal, barley and rye, and legumes such as black, pinto and navy beans, provide significant health benefits and should be incorporated into all versions of the Paleolithic diet," Dionne says, "except in the presence of food allergies or medically necessary dietary restrictions. "

Dionne would prefer folks to use the Paleo diet as simply a way to eat more whole foods. She believes in using common sense to modify your diet so that you begin to include more of our ancestral foods such as wild fish, grass-fed meats, and organic fruits and vegetables whenever possible.

What could be easier and healthier than that?

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