

# What Diet Should You Follow?

September, 2018

There are two reasons to consider modifying your current eating practices: you are overweight or you are concerned about developing cardiovascular disease.

Chances are you have been exposed to multiple competing and seemingly contradictory dietary plans over the years. Choices range from virtually vegan, ultra low fat diets (Ornish , Esselstyn, Campbell, or Pritikin) to ultra low carb, high fat (Atkins/South Beach).

As I surveyed the top diet books on Amazon recently, I saw one gimmicky, pseudoscientific diet after another. From the Whole30 approach (which illogically completely eliminates any beans and legumes, dairy products, alcohol, all grains, and starchy vegetables like potatoes (see how absurd this diet is here)) to Dr. Gundry's Plant Paradox (aka lectin is the new gluten (see my blog post on this diet on the huckster's latest attempt to scare you into buying his useless supplements).

All of these dietary approaches are successful to a varying extent in achieving weight loss in the short term.

However, what we should be most interested in is a diet that we can follow long term and which has been clearly shown to reduce risk of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases. Preferably, to promote long term satisfaction such a diet accomplishes these goals without sacrificing our ability to enjoy the wonderful diversity of the plant and animal kingdom available for the omnivore's consumption.

Neither the ultra low fat nor the ultra low carb diets have reliable long term data showing a reduction in heart disease with diet alone.

However, the Mediterranean diet (with my suggested modifications) has the best evidence for reducing risk of cardiovascular disease and allows one to choose from a broad palette of foods.

## Dr. Pearson's Modifications of The Mediterranean Diet

I have written extensively on my blog at [www.theskepticalcardiologist.com](http://www.theskepticalcardiologist.com) on the following topics. I recommend you sign up to follow my posts which happen about once a week. If you go to the URL address above you can either search for topics of interest or click on categories related to diet and cardiovascular disease. to find the relevant posts.

### **Dairy Fat Is OK**

There is no evidence that consuming low fat dairy products is healthier than high fat dairy. Multiple studies show that consumption of full fat dairy is associated with a reduced risk of vascular disease (heart attack and stroke).

Yogurt (full fat) and cheese seem to be especially beneficial for reducing vascular risk. What tends to happen when dairy products are processed and marketed after removal of the natural healthy dairy fat is the addition of synthetic additives and sugar.

## **Fat Doesn't Make You Fat or Cause Heart Disease**

The evidence that fat in general is bad for heart health is nonexistent. The fat/ heart health relationship is very complex. National guidelines were issued before there was evidence to support reducing fat in the diet.

Now recommendations are to reduce saturated fat (the kind mostly found in animal fat and dairy fat ) however there are good saturated fats and bad saturated and even this recommendation is not well supported by scientific data.

## **Don't Worry About Cholesterol In Your Food-Eggs Are Fine**

I've written about eggs and dietary cholesterol a lot on The skeptical Cardiologist. There is no evidence that the cholesterol you consume influences your risk of heart disease.

Egg yolks are high in cholesterol and for many years dietary guidelines recommended minimizing their consumption. However, there is no problem with eating eggs in moderation.

Similarly, shellfish have high cholesterol content but there is no reason to avoid eating them.

## **Sugar Is The Major Toxin in Most People's Diets, Not Fat**

Sugar and refined carbohydrates should be eliminated or minimized in the diet. Pay attention to how much added sugar is in what you eat and avoid it.

Avoid sugar-sweetened beverages (soda, energy drinks, juices) and drink water if you are thirsty.

The major sources of refined carbohydrates in the American diet are white bread, pasta and potatoes. These are often the comfort foods we crave when we're feeling down or stressed: pasta, fries, white bread, cookies, pastries, ice cream, cakes.

In general, I would advise a diet that is more low carbohydrate than low fat but either approach works if you eliminate most or all refined carbohydrates and added sugar.

## **Eat Real Food, Avoid Processed and Ultra-Processed Foods**

Michael Pollan has a great book that I recommend entitled "Food Rules". His basic tenet is "Eat FOOD, Mostly Plants, Not too much". Thus food means real food, not highly processed food-like substances which contain multiple ingredients and preservatives. Plant-based foods, vegetables, fruit, legumes, nuts are very nutrient dense and every study seems to agree that the more of these you can consume the better.

## **Savor Food and Try to Cook It Yourself As Much As Possible**

Cut back on portion sizes. Stop eating when you are satisfied, not when you are stuffed or full. Eat slowly, eat with family and friends and savor the food.

## **Two Things I Recommend Because They Make Sense**

As much as possible eat food that is grown and produced locally and in season. The farther and longer food travels, the more it has to be modified to extend storage life.

Cows that are allowed to graze in natural grass pastures provide healthier milk and beef compared to those raised on a factory farm and fed corn.

## **Exercise, Move, and Stand. Avoid Sitting For Long Periods.**

Please see my exercise sheet for details of recommendations

Finally, as we age it becomes necessary to incorporate some element of regular aerobic exercise into our daily lives in order to keep at an acceptable weight. I advise aerobic exercise (jogging, running, treadmill, bicycle, walking very rapidly) to the point of being breathless and preferably getting the heart rate up to 85% of your predicted maximal heart rate (220 minus your age) for 30-40 minutes 3-4 times per week.

For optimal weight management some form of weight training or isometric exercise is optimal. There are only two

lifestyle changes that we know of that raise the good (HDL) cholesterol, the one that removes cholesterol from the lining of the arteries-exercise and alcohol. Regular exercise also improves mood, prolongs mental functioning and strengthens bones.

# **Key components of the Dr. P Modified Mediterranean diet**

## **Plant Forward**

The phrase "plant-based diet" is used a lot these days. Diets under this description range from vegan which excludes any animal products to the Mediterranean Diet which includes animal meat, dairy and eggs.

## **Dr. Pearson's Plant-Based Diet**

Since the term "plant-based diet" (PBD) apparently means whatever a writer would like it to mean, I have come up with my own definition:

With the Dr. P Plant-Based Diet© "your primary focus in meal planning is to make sure that you are regularly consuming a large and diverse amount of healthy foods that come from plants."

If you don't make it your focus, it is too easy to succumb to all the cookies, donuts, pies, cakes, pretzels, chips, French fries, breakfast bars and other calorie-dense but nutrient-light products that are cheap and readily available.

In Dr. P's Plant-Based Diet© meat, eggs, and full fat dairy are on the table. They are consumed in moderation and they don't come from plants (i.e. factory farms).

I, like the PBD definers of yore, have taken the liberty of including many vague terms in my definition. Let me see if I can be more precise:

Regularly = at least daily.

Large amount = 3 to 4 servings daily.

Healthy = a highly contentious term and one, like "plant-based" that one can twist to mean whatever one likes. My take on "healthy" can be seen on this blog. I'm not a fan of plant-based margarines, added sugar, whether from a plant or not, should be avoided, and the best way to avoid added sugar is to avoid ultra-processed foods.

Food From Plants= fruit, vegetables, nuts, legumes.

Ultra-processed foods (formulations of several ingredients which, besides salt, sugar, oils and fats, include food substances not used in culinary preparations, in particular, flavours, colours, sweeteners, emulsifiers and other additives used to imitate sensorial qualities of unprocessed or minimally processed foods and their culinary preparations or to disguise undesirable qualities of the final product).

Ultra-processed foods account for 58% of all calories in the US diet, and contribute nearly 90% of all added sugars.

I do like the food writer Michael Pollan's simple rules to "Eat Food. Mostly Plants. Not Too Much." and this NY Times piece summarizes much of what is in his short, funny and helpful Food Rules book:

you're much better off eating whole fresh foods than processed food products. That's what I mean by the recommendation to eat "food." Once, food was all you could eat, but today there are lots of other edible foodlike substances in the supermarket. These novel products of food science often come in packages festooned with health claims, which brings me to a related rule of thumb: if you're concerned about your health, you should probably avoid food products that make health claims. Why? Because a health claim on a food product is a good indication that it's not really food, and food is what you want to eat.

On Dr. P's Plant-Based Diet© you can add butter to your leeks and green onions. You can add eggs to your onions, tomatoes and peppers. And you can eat salads full of lots of cool different plants for lunch.

## Nuts And Olive Oil

I've written a lot about nuts on my blog and periodically hand out my Dr. P's Heart Nuts to patients.

The PREDIMED trial, in particular, showed a remarkable benefit in reducing heart attacks and strokes when patients ate a Mediterranean diet supplemented with 30g mixed nuts per day (15g walnuts, 7.5g almonds and 7.5g hazelnuts). Walnuts and almonds are actually drupes, but hazelnuts are true nuts.

The Mediterranean diet, including nuts, reduced the risk of cardiovascular diseases (myocardial infarction, stroke or cardiovascular death) by 30% and specifically reduced the risk of stroke by 49% when compared to a reference diet consisting of advice on a low-fat diet (American Heart Association guidelines).

The Mediterranean diet enriched with extra-virgin olive oil also reduced the risk of cardiovascular diseases by 30%.

You can buy 454 grams of walnuts or hazelnuts for \$14 , and 454 grams of almonds for \$10. Thus, for 46 cents for the walnuts, 23 cents for the hazelnuts and 16 cents for the almonds (total 85 cents) you can recreate the snack that the Spaniards ate in PREDIMED.

This compares to Kind bars which retail anywhere from \$1.99 to \$3.50.

The PREDIMED investigators explain why they chose these specific nuts:

"WALNUTS. Walnuts differ from other nuts in that they are very rich in omega 6 and omega 3 type unsaturated fats. Moreover, the antioxidants they contain are among the most powerful in the plant world. It should be mentioned that, like omega 3 in fish, nut fats possess important beneficial properties for general health and the heart in particular.

ALMONDS. Almonds form part of many traditional desserts and sweets of Arabic origin, such as nougat. Currently, Spain is the second largest producer and consumer of almonds in the world, after the United States. As with hazelnuts and olive oil, almonds are rich in oleic acid. They differ from other nuts in that they contain more fibre, vitamin E, calcium and magnesium.

HAZELNUTS. Hazelnuts, another widely consumed nut in Spain, are very rich in oleic acid. Furthermore, they are nuts that provide a large amount of folic acid, a vitamin very important for regulating the metabolism, a lack of which can lead to thrombosis and an acceleration of degenerative processes such as arteriosclerosis and senile dementia."

## **Eat Fish (Not Fish Oil Supplements)**

I've written numerous posts on the fish oil supplement industry. All recent scientific analyses show that fish oil supplements do not reduce your risk of heart attack or stroke. Stop taking them!

On the other hand I strongly advise the consumption of 2 portions of fish per week on average.

## Alcohol, Coffee, and Diet Soda

Aaron Carroll in his book "The Bad Food Bible" does a good job of summarizing and analyzing the research for coffee, alcohol and diet-soda:

-alcohol in moderation lowers your risk of dying, primarily by reducing cardiovascular death

-coffee, although widely perceived as unhealthy, is actually good for the vast majority of people

-diet soda has not clearly been shown to have adverse health effects.

In comparison to the bizarre advice from nutrition books which dominate the best-selling diet books, I found The Bad Food Bible to be a consistent, well-written, extensively researched, scientifically-based, unbiased guide to diet and can highly recommend it to my readers and patients.

For those seeking more details a few quotes

on alcohol:

"Taken together, all of this evidence points to a few conclusions. First, the majority of the research suggests that moderate alcohol consumption is associated with decreased rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and death. Second, it also seems to be associated with increased rates of some cancers (especially breast cancer), cirrhosis, chronic pancreatitis, and accidents, although this negative impact from alcohol seems to be smaller than its positive impact on cardiovascular health. Indeed, the

gains in cardiovascular disease seem to outweigh the losses in all the other diseases combined. The most recent report of the USDA Scientific Advisory Panel agrees that "moderate alcohol consumption can be incorporated into the calorie limits of most healthy eating patterns."

Keep in mind that moderate consumption is up to one drink per day for women, and two drinks for men (my apologies to women in general and the Eternal Fiancee' of the Skeptical Cardiologist in particular) and be aware of what constitutes "one drink."

Also keep in mind that any alcohol consumption raises the risk of atrial fibrillation and that if you have a cardiomyopathy caused by alcohol you should avoid it altogether.

on coffee:

"It's time people stopped viewing coffee as something to be limited or avoided. It's a completely reasonable part of a healthy diet, and it appears to have more potential benefits than almost any other beverage we consume."

"Coffee is more than my favorite breakfast drink; it's usually my breakfast, period. And I feel better about that now than ever before. It's time we started treating coffee as the wonderful elixir it is, not the witch's brew that C. W. Post made it out to be."

Strangely enough, coffee is usually my breakfast as well (although I recommend against adding titanium oxide to your morning java). Why am I not compelled to consume food in the morning? Because breakfast is not the most important meal of the day and I don't eat until I'm hungry.

Carroll notes that many Americans are convinced that artificial sweeteners are highly toxic:

"no article I've written has been met with as much anger and vitriol as the first piece I wrote on this subject for the New York Times, in July 2015, in which I admitted, "My wife and I limit our children's consumption of soda to around four to five times a week. When we let them have soda, it's . . . almost always sugar-free."

He notes, as I have done, that added sugar is the real public enemy number one in our diets. He reviews the scientific studies that look at toxicity of the various artificial sweeteners and finds that they don't convincingly prove any significant health effects in humans.

Some believe that artificial sweeteners contribute to obesity, but the only evidence supporting this idea comes from observational studies. For many reasons, we should not highly value observational studies but one factor, "reverse causation," is highly likely to be present in studies of diet sodas. If diet soda consumption is associated with obesity, is it the cause, or do those who are obese tend to drink diet soda. Observational studies cannot answer this question but randomized studies can.

Carroll points out that:

the randomized controlled trials (which are almost always better and can show causality) showed that diet drinks significantly reduced weight, BMI, fat, and waist circumference.”