

An old truth packaged in a new study: fat is good for you

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Humans die quickly if utterly deprived of fat. A high-fat, carb-free life produces lean, fit bodies

Healthy eating and weight management are both obsessions in my family. There are no food regimes known to man that have not been followed by one or more of us in our quest for the magic bullet that will keep us trim in perpetuity without catching the Grim Reaper's eye prematurely.

Weight Watchers works for my sisters, and it worked for me, until I grew depressed having to keep choosing between a second glass of wine and (palatable) food sufficient to ward off real hunger pangs.

So now, having over-indulged in the spring and early summer, and bolstered by a new study confirming my good judgment, I have come crawling back to the system that always made the most sense to me, but is often tagged as less than optimal for health. Goodbye carbs, hello fat! Once again, I'm never hungry, I am drinking two glasses of wine when I want to, my stomach is flat and my jeans fit comfortably.

This new study comes out of McMaster University's Population Health Research Institute, charmingly named PURE, an acronym for Prospective Urban Rural Epidemiology. PURE followed 135,000 people across 18 countries from mixed socio-economic backgrounds for seven and a half years. Their main finding is that lower risk for mortality is associated with carb avoidance and a higher intake of fat – about 35 per cent of daily energy needs.

And, contrary to received wisdom, it doesn't matter what kind of fat it is. Even saturated fat, which has long been considered a risk factor in cardiovascular disease, is actually okay, according to PURE researchers. Go ahead and order that bone-in rib steak and creamed spinach once in a while without remorse. Fruit and veggies and low-glycemic legumes like beans and lentils are good for us, but – sorry, vegetarians – beyond 500 grams a day, there's no benefit.

So basically: protein and fat good, carbs meh. Why does this all sound so familiar? I suppose because it is just old wine in a validating new bottle. Its conclusions reflect the underpinnings of the Montignac diet, popular in the 1990s, and are not very much different from the modified Dr Atkins Diet of the early 2000s and the less manichean 1996 Protein Power diet by Micheal Eades.

But for those with long diet memories like me, the low-carb revolution goes much further back. I well remember Dr. Herman Taller's 1961 diet book, *Calories Don't Count*, according to which you could eat 5000 calories a day as long as you ate no carbs and imbibed a tablespoon of safflower oil before each meal. Taller himself (claimed he) lost 65 pounds in eight months doing exactly that.

Then there was a similar diet, popular in the 1960s amongst my parents' highly social circle: The Drinking Man's Diet, promoted by a San Francisco bon vivant, Robert Cameron. His slim volume begins, "Did you ever hear of a diet which was fun to follow? A diet which would let you have two martinis before lunch, and a thick steak generously spread with Sauce Béarnaise, so that you could make your sale in a relaxed atmosphere and go back to the office without worrying about having gained so much as an ounce? A diet which allows you to take out your favorite girl for a dinner of squab and broccoli with hollandaise sauce and Chateau Lafitte, to be followed by an evening of rapture and champagne?"

Guffaw all you want, but Cameron died age 98, fit and trim to the end after a lifetime of following his own advice.

The low carb regime has historical logic on its side. Humans are naturally carnivorous. No society, except for religious or ideological reasons, has ever willingly adopted vegetarianism. Grains were only introduced into our diets 10,000 years ago. Humans die quickly if utterly deprived of fat but, as many indigenous peoples can attest, a high-fat, carb-free life once produced lean, fit bodies. Hunter communities only began encountering serious health problems like diabetes and cardiovascular disease when they started eating sugar and grains in quantity.

Perhaps, thanks to the encouragement this PURE study has given me, I'll maintain the low-carb lifestyle from now until the end. It's not only about the weight. It's how you feel. I've known both fat envy and sugar envy. Sugar envy is worse in the moment, but fat envy is worse over time. Fat envy leads to crankiness and resentment. Fat repletion confers a eupeptic glow. Missing sweet? Pour some 35 per cent cream into a diet Root Beer. Stir. Sip. Glow.

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