



May 23, 2015 – Grand Rapids, MI

## Do You Have Orthorexia Nervosa?

Based on the prior messages, the question has to be: Is obsession with healthy foods really such a bad thing, worthy of an actual medical term? After all, it's really healthy eating, isn't it?

I can't argue with that. However, any time people transition from freedom of choice to being compelled to do something that seems beyond their control, that's a problem. Maybe not the worst problem, but a problem nevertheless.

I've observed first-hand anorexia nervosa when I was a college professor; college students seem to be prone to it, especially the female students. One of my close friends in grad school was a recovering bulimic. The difference is that anorexia focuses on the quantity of food, while orthorexia is obsessed with the quality of the food. The problem with either condition is that people don't know they're in the grip of an obsession; for anorexics, being able to see every single bone seems normal. That can be the situation for someone obsessed with healthy foods, whether one of the diets I described on Thursday or some other form of restricted eating, such as eliminating all carbs or all fats.

There may be a milder form of this concern about eating, one I've experienced myself. Whenever I eat less to lose weight, I sometimes reach a point where I can't decide what to eat. Yes, even an expert such as myself hits that wall when I don't have the ingredients I need or I don't have time to cook. I don't want one more Greek yogurt or one more handful of raw veggies. It can paralyze me and if I get too hungry, well, I eat just about anything.

The difference is that people obsessed with healthy foods don't allow any deviation. They will get the foods they feel they need, and you'd better not get in their way. They will inquire at length about the source of organic foods at a farmers market. Is it organic enough? Nothing artificial or processed or cooked could ever be allowed to enter their body. They will read labels incessantly to make sure the food is pure. They take it to a level that's extreme; it dominates their life.



Dr. Steven Bratman first coined the term orthorexia nervosa from the Greek words meaning roughly "eating correctly" in the 1990s after he became obsessed with the curative power of food while living in a communal setting; he was later able to step back and took a hard look at himself. Italian researchers developed a validated questionnaire to identify people who may have such an obsessive relationship with healthy foods (2); Dr. Bratman also developed a short questionnaire that's much simpler to use (3). If you wonder where you stand with healthy eating, regardless if I've mentioned the type you're concerned about or not, take Dr. Bratman's questionnaire at the link below.

It doesn't have to be that way. For instance, it's challenging to eat vegan. Paula and I scare ourselves away every time we think about trying it, but I know vegans who take it all in stride (once they move past that initial learning phase). They know what they can eat and where, and when you dine with them the focus is on the fun, not the food.

If you think you have a problem, just chill out a little more when it comes to food. No single food you eat once will destroy your health or make you overweight, regardless of how good or how bad; you could eat a Costco-size chocolate cake all by yourself, and while you'd probably feel bad that day and the next, your body will bounce back. Just don't eat one every week.

If you feel it's getting away from you and it has become more than just spending a little too much time thinking about what you're eating, seek out a mental health professional to talk about the issue. Again, eating healthy is a good thing. It just can't dominate every waking moment, just like nothing else should. If you're spending most of your time while you're at work or with friends thinking about what you're going to eat (or exercise or videogames or Facebook)—if it gets to the point where you aren't focusing on what and who are in front of you—you have a problem. If you can't relax and refocus on your own, you need to get help so you can get your life back.

I want you to eat less, eat better, and move more. I just don't want you to obsess about it. Life is just too short for that.

What are you prepared to do today?

## **Dr. Chet**

### References:

1. <http://www.newsweek.com/when-eating-healthily-becomes-fixation-319453>.
2. [Eating Weight Disord. 10: e28-e32, 2005.](#)
3. <http://www.eufic.org/article/en/artid/orthorexia-nervosa/>

---

## **WGVU** FM 88.5/95.3 **npr** ***Straight Talk on Health***

Hear Dr. Chet's take on the latest health news and research—listen to *Straight Talk on Health* Sunday at 7:30 a.m. and 6 p.m. in the Eastern Time Zone on WGVU-FM 88.5 or 95.3, or listen live via the Internet by going to [www.wgvu.org/wgvunews](http://www.wgvu.org/wgvunews) and clicking on "Listen Live" at the top.

---

The health information in this message is designed for educational purposes only. It's not a substitute for medical advice from your healthcare provider, and you should not use it to diagnose or treat a health problem or disease. It's designed to motivate you to work toward better health, and that includes seeing your healthcare professional regularly. If what you've read raises any questions or concerns about health problems or possible diseases, talk to your healthcare provider today.

**Subscribe to the Message from Dr. Chet at [DrChet.com](http://DrChet.com) — © Chet Zelasko PhD LLC**