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Handpicking the Data

I'm continuing my look at a recent paper that called into question the process for limiting saturated fat intake to less than 10% in the new Dietary Guidelines (1). What else should we know about how the conclusions were derived and who wrote the op-ed? Let's start with the author.

Nina Teicholz is an investigative journalist and accomplished writer and has more of a scientific background than most health and nutrition writers today. That's great, but it's just not good enough. After reading the article, I watched a TEDx talk she gave. She has a definite opinion on how the current saturated fat and heart disease approach evolved beginning with Ancel Keys and the Seven Country Study. She believes he and like-minded scientists guided the way the dietary guidelines evolved. She goes on to suggest that some science was ignored, and thus the Dietary Guidelines were developed with the emphasis on grains.

The real problem is in her use of cherry-picked studies to support her position. She states that two significant studies published in 2012 showed no association between heart disease and saturated fat. I examined both. One was just a research review and that's always prone to hand-picking the data to support a position (2). The second, by the same author, was a meta-analysis of studies that examine fat intake and heart disease (3). The conclusion was there was no association. My problem? A majority of the studies used Food Frequency Questionnaires to collect nutritional data. I don't care how many times you analyze the data, using questionnaires that are fraught with errors cannot give you the accuracy you need to make these important conclusions about diet and disease. For example, how many times did you eat beef in July? Unless you're a vegetarian, I'll bet you have no idea. People's lives depend on getting good information, and food recall just isn't good enough.



You can probably guess I disagree with her position on saturated fat. As it relates to heart disease, I do but not for the reason you might think. I'll give you the Bottom Line on Saturday.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. BMJ 2015;351:h4962 doi: 10.1136/bmj.h4962.
2. Am J Clin Nutr 2010;91:502-509.
3. Am J Clin Nutr 2010;91:535-46.

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