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The Bottom Line on a Low-Fat Diet

In this final look at the opinion article in JAMA, I'm going to cover another statement the author made along with some thoughts on the article and why it matters.

In the article, he suggests that, based on the theory that carbohydrates do not cause weight gain, public health policy was changed to encourage the use of more starch and sugars (1). Specifically he cited Healthy People 2000 Nutrition Goal 2.15, which recommended that food manufacturers “increase to at least 5,000 brand items the availability of processed food products that are reduced in fat and saturated fat (2).” The author suggests that food manufacturers responded and decreased fat and replaced them with starches and sugar. He makes it seem that was the only goal related to reducing fat intake, but that’s not the only nutrition goal in Healthy People 2000.



Healthy People 2000 Nutrition Goal 2.6 said this:

“Vegetables (including legumes such as beans and peas), fruits, and grains are good sources of complex carbohydrates and dietary fiber, as well as several vitamins and minerals. These foods are also generally low in fat and can be substitutes for foods high in fat.”

Just like his statement that carbohydrates can be eaten without regard to amount, he ignores many goals that focused on healthy eating.

He then uses a great strategy. He mentions that some experts always focus on what the Dietary Guidelines have always said about carbohydrates and where they should come from. But he tosses that argument aside by saying that doesn’t matter because of the call to increase sugars in the diet, the Healthy People goals for more processed foods, and other ways food policy has been presented to the public.

He concludes by calling for funding for more research on new nutrition approaches to diet, being careful not to make the mistakes of the low-fat diet policies of the past.

The Problems

There are many problems with this opinion article. The author is a leading expert in the fields of endocrinology and nutrition with every credential to back it up, so that’s not the problem. Here are the three issues I have with this article:

- He selects a fairly obscure series of papers to support the “sugar won’t make you fat” hypothesis. It’s a theory I hadn’t heard before and after reviewing the papers he cites, it’s not a compelling argument.
- This opinion will exist in JAMA for perpetuity. Just as the author used obscure papers to make his argument against the high-carbohydrate diet, someone in the future will read what he writes and accept it as fact without checking the science.
- Third, and this is the most important point, he didn’t really address total caloric intake. He didn’t show that even when not overeating, a high-carbohydrate diet causes obesity and diabetes. That’s the implication,

but remember this: there has never been a single study that has compared a high-fat diet to a high-carbohydrate diet when calories are kept equal in normal weight subjects that proves they gain weight on one diet or the other.

Low fat or high fat—it basically doesn't matter. If you eat more than your body needs, you'll gain weight. That's the real problem.

The Bottom Line

The opinion article I reviewed this week never made a headline. It probably won't get a significant audience outside the medical and scientific community, but I wanted to bring it to your attention. Whether the author's an expert in the field or a science hooligan, what he says must be backed by actual research. He doesn't have to present every possible argument; after all, it's his opinion. But the science he cites must check out. It's as simple as that.

Know what checks out every time? Eat less. Eat better. Move more.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. <http://bit.ly/2dmWZGU>
2. Healthy People 2000. 1991. Public Health Service (DHHS), Rockville, MD.

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