

WHAT ARE WE EATING?

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Most of us think about food many times each day as we encounter the multiple choices of prepared food products and fresh foods which are available to us. The decisions that we make on a daily basis add up to a cumulative effect in regards to our health, well-being, energy level, and ultimate longevity. We are enlightened with the fact that in identical twin studies, only 20% of their ultimate health and longevity is due to genetic background and the other 80% is due to nutrition and lifestyle. We have also been told by countless newspaper articles and television programs that obesity is a certain pathway to increased incidence of disease and earlier demise. Coupled with the known fact that caloric restriction is the “key” to a longer and healthier life, then you have some basic guidelines about what to do each day with your eating habits.

As early as 600 BC, a Greek sage named Alcmaeon announced to the world that not only was too little food injurious to your health, but too much was also the same. Throughout the years we have examples of scholars or teachers who focused to a large extent on the nutritional value of food. It was also obvious that the groups of people who lived in poverty had a much poorer quality of food and had shorter lifespan related to this. There are many instances of people during the Middle Ages living to a long life, due in large part to good nutrition.

Hypocrites, a Greek who lived around 400 BC, was said to have lived to age 90. His writings discuss the virtues of moderation and exercise. He noted that the amount of food you needed was based on the amount of exercise and also the season of the year. He felt that nutrition was extremely important in the disease processes and in fact stated “Let food be your medicine and medicine be your food.” Another physician, Celcus, who was Roman, lived about 130 AD and discussed the nutritious components of food and laid down some guidelines for us to follow. Interestingly, the School of Salerno in Italy was very active around that time and was run by Benedictine Monks who used food and spices in a therapeutic manner for both the wounded and the sick. The Crusaders later brought this information back to Northern Europe to be spread amongst different centers of learning in Europe.

With the advent of countries exploring the world with large navies, the development of scurvy amongst the sailors eventually brought attention to the fact that something was “missing” in their food to cause this. It took a long time for everyone to finally accept the idea that there was a special nutritious element in some foods that would prevent scurvy and death from this terrible disease. This turned out to be vitamin C. When it was found that raw potatoes and limes prevent scurvy, whereas other foods could not, this was the “medicine” of choice for a period of time. The British sailors came to be “Limeys” because they usually carried either limes or lime juice with them to prevent scurvy.

It was not until later that some of these special food elements were really recognized, and knowledge of this became the basis of understanding the role of vitamins (vital-amines) to our health.

In the 17th century, a much celebrated chemist, Justus von Liebig, formulated a role that foods contained three elements and that nothing else besides carbohydrates, proteins, and fat when necessary for life. These were “pure” food derivatives and were pretty much devoid of vitamins. Another competing school of thought at that time noted that there were “vital” elements in food that promoted health and well-being. Later when vitamins were identified, purified, and finally synthesized, the vitamin craze caught on in this and other countries and from that time on a great deal of understanding was gained about healthy food. According to Walter Gratzer in *Terrors of the Table*, “alteration or pollution of food became rampant” in Victorian times by enterprising scoundrels who watered the milk, recycled the tea, added strychnine to beer to make it more bitter, and colored children’s sweets with copper arsenite or lead chromates to make it look or taste better.

In the late 1880’s, it was recognized that rickets, a disease of the bones, was due to a problem with depositing calcium. Calcium phosphate and other products were used to treat rickets, but with no success. It was noted that a lack of sunshine was a contributory factor and could halt the progress of the disease and even prevent it. However, it was also noted that cod liver oil, but not vegetable oils, could also have the same effect. Studies were then done to animals in the London Zoo, which showed that the cubs developed rickets if they were given a diet devoid of animal fats but thrived when the diet was supplemented with egg yolks or cod liver oil. Purification of the essential element led to a concentrated form of vitamin D, available today as a supplement. We should be taking this vitamin all winter long when we’re not exposed to as much sunshine as we are in the spring, summer, and fall seasons.

In the US, more than two-thirds of the food consumed is processed food. This means that it is usually devoid of nutrient value, except perhaps for some added vitamins that are not nearly as effective as “whole food” vitamins. With the advertising power of the food industry, the consumption of hydrogenated fats, flour, and sugar has increased incredibly. The relative lack of nutrition and the high caloric value of foods in this country has made us the heaviest population in the world (in times past, we were the tallest population). An example of some of the things that are eaten is “imitation cream,” which is made of refined hydrogenated vegetable oil, sugar, monoglycerides, polyoxyethylene, sorbitan, salt, sodium alginate, artificial flavoring and coloring. This is characteristic of many of the processed foods that we ingest on a daily basis.

The bottom line is, be very select about what you eat, go online and find out which are the most nutritious foods so that you can eat them, and reduce your intake to the point that you can lose weight if you need to maintain a healthy weight if you are already there. Eliminating all sugars and most wheat-based products would be a good start or this. Always watch the amount of food that you eat, and don’t eat the “empty calories” as they only take away from your health and well being.