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Spine & Sports: Why your diet doesn't work

It's well into our new year and TV commercials are in high gear for gyms and diet plans. But Americans are fatter than ever. We've heard about so many diet programs, but the bottom line is this: Most diets don't work. Here's why.

All diet plans that restrict calories will lead to weight loss. In fact, a professor of nutrition at Kansas State University lost weight while only eating snack cakes. This is not a healthy or sustainable way to drop weight, but he proved his point.

Humans, hedonistic by nature, fall prey to their old eating habits. Everyone knows this, and that's why there are so many weight-loss products and schemes on the market, something that has not changed in a half century. What is the cause of the problem? Why can't people just stick to a diet forever?

Often, a diet plan is too restrictive, where only foods listed on a sheet are allowed or only their proprietary, pre-packaged — and expensive — meals or shakes are to be eaten. Calorie-counting and weighing and measuring plans are a chore. And who wants to do more chores just to eat?

In the 1970s Dr. Robert Atkins, a cardiologist, demonstrated that eating a high-protein, high-fat, but low-carbohydrate meals created a physiologic state of fat burning. People lost weight while eating pork rinds and other taboo foods in place of breads and sugars. But in subsequent years, there were marketing trends pushing "low fat," "natural whole grains," "no cholesterol" and sexy pre-packaged products. All erroneous bunk!

We need to eat cholesterol. Fat isn't entirely bad. Eggs are great, including the yolk, too. Sadly, most people continue to struggle with their diets, falling prey to low-fat, processed-grain foods that are shamefully marketed as "natural" and "healthy."

Better diet plans came on board, like the South Beach or Zone diets that appreciated higher protein intake and the swapping out of processed carbs. Then the "Paleo Diet" emerged. Based on the diet initially described in the 1970s by a gastroenterologist, Walter L. Voegtlin, but popularized recently by Loren Cordain, the Paleo Diet's foundation is based on the theory about how we humans have a gastrointestinal system that has not changed for a few million years, and that we survived and evolved on a diet similar to what a caveman would eat, "critters and plants." The Paleolithic diet is on target in many ways. It's naturally high in protein with moderate and healthy forms of fat and complex carbs, and it eliminates processed grains and sugars that we know are a problem.

Being on a strict Paleo diet is a real challenge for even the most motivated people, and, thankfully, there is no reason for most people to be 100-percent Paleo in order to be healthy or to lose weight. While there is much nitpicking in nutrition circles about the Paleolithic diet's rationale, the bottom line is that it makes a lot of sense and gets consistent results.

Here are the two key concepts: Clinical studies clearly prove that high-protein diets promote fat loss while sparing muscle; and recent studies show that high-glycemic index or sugary foods stimulate brain areas associated with addiction. One study comparing obese to lean women demonstrated that showing pictures of sweets to the obese women caused their brains to be stimulated, but not for the lean women. Thus, more dietary protein spares our muscles during weight loss and eating sweets fosters addictive cravings.

It is clear that we humans need to consume more protein foods and also more plants. While not a Paleolithic food, (unprocessed) dairy products can often be consumed and not cause trouble. Eating protein-rich, low-sugar foods in reasonable portions reduces the brain-craving of sugary high-glycemic index foods and it causes fat to burn. A modified Paleo diet, even with some cheating, should guarantee weight loss and reduce cravings — and reducing the addictive craving is key to staying on a diet.

How does one start the process, especially if there's a household of cereal-eating, cookie-craving kids? First, toss out all the grain products: cereals, chips, crackers, cookies and goodies. Nobody will die! No matter how bad the temper tantrums, do not give in. Begin one meal at a time, eliminating bread and replacing it with the Paleo "critters and plants" as best as possible. Breakfast could be eggs and meat, with fruit or whole yogurt, for example. Lunch could be deli meats and cheese rolled up with lettuce. A nice dinner could be a roasted chicken with yams and a green vegetable. Evening snacks for hungry and growing kids? Try beef jerky, almonds or cheese. Consider buying a blender and have fun playing with the combinations of greens that can go into a drinkable concoction. After eating like this for a few weeks, the cravings for goodies begins to dissipate and everyone loses fat weight. No chores of weighing, measuring, calculating, subscribing or joining. Just eat natural food found in any grocery store.

It is important to add exercise to this process. If you can't do it on your own, consider hiring a personal trainer or join in on group exercise classes. Then you've got the winning combination: fat-burning weight loss, reduced cravings and increased motivation to continue to eat well, stay fit and look great.

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