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What Can You Expect From Your Diet?

by Robert T. Pottenger, M.D.

The following excerpts are from a speech given at the 1954 Annual Convention of the American Nutrition Society, held in Pasadena, California.

There are a few questions that my patients ask me over and over again. Perhaps you often wanted to ask the same questions: "Why isn't every one who eats a good diet healthy?" "Why do I have my health problems, when my husband eats everything and still has none?" "What can you expect from a diet anyway?"

In any system designed for the promotion of health the three basic principles are rest, exercise and nutrition. You ask then, "Which of these three basic principles is the most important?" The best answer I can give is the old answer, "Which is the most important leg of a three-legged stool?"

Improve quality

It has been my clinical observation that patients show increasing vigor and health for a number of years after adopting better dietary measures.

It is the responsibility of each and every housewife to know what foods give the best nourishment, and to know how they should be marketed and prepared for the table. It is the problem of the housewife to get her family to look for additional quality in food besides flavor. It is the responsibility of the doctors to find out why certain individuals on a good diet do not do as well as the rest. The use of diet for the treatment of disease, when a standard optimum diet is altered to meet the specific needs of a sick individual, is definitely the problem of a doctor.

So far I have stressed that anyone can

expect to enjoy better health, if he improves the quality of his diet. . . .

Common cause

The first and most obvious cause for the failure of a good diet to produce good health is one too frequently forgotten. The person may actually have any one of the several hundred diseases known to man—cancer, heart failure, kidney failure, rheumatism, tuberculosis, syphilis and the like. Nutrition may play a role in their treatment but medical care is essential to their successful management.

Ignorance

The second most important reason for the apparent failure of a good diet is ignorance. It will be a long while before we know just what human beings should eat, for each species of animals has its own specific requirements. For instance, the only mammals that need vitamin C are the primates which include man, guinea pigs and the marmot. You can construct a diet adequate in all other factors but vitamin C which will support the life and health of all other animals, but if you give that diet to these three species they will die. Thus, the final determination of a perfect diet for man will come in the study of man himself. . .

Overeating

Another common cause for the failure of a good diet is overeating. Too much is too much! The liability to degeneration

(Turn to page 42)

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Your Diet

(From page 8)

tive diseases of all sorts is increased by obesity.

In the search for the perfect diet we have to consider quantity as well as quality. For instance, hardening of the arteries is not seen in the slow starvation which accompanies tuberculosis or cancer, or which is found in political and economic conditions.

There are a lot of people who have loose stools or constipation and they complain even when on a good diet. Many of these people also have vague toxic complaints like headaches, muscle and joint pains. . . .

We have mentioned disease, ignorance and overeating as causes of ill health in what otherwise might be a well nourished healthy diet. . . .

Vitamin deficiency

It has long been recognized that when a person develops marked clinical symptoms of a vitamin deficiency, thereafter he is prone to recurrence of his symptoms with a less severe grade of deficiency. It is as though the enzyme system dependent on that particular vitamin has been partially destroyed, and remaining portions have to be kept saturated with a particular vitamin to function at a rate sufficient to avoid a return of the symptoms. This is why a person on an optimum diet may sometimes do still better with additional vitamins.

Example

I have a patient who has had cheilosis for 10 years. (This is a condition where the skin at the corner of the lips crack, due to riboflavin deficiency.) By taking large doses of the B-complex she has been able to control this almost entirely. I put her on what I considered an opti-

Prohibitive price

"The best thing for you is to quit smoking and drinking and go to bed early every night," a doctor told his patient.

"Frankly, Doc," he answered, "I don't deserve the best. What's the second best?"

mum diet, much better than the one she'd been on, and stopped her additional vitamins. At the end of a week she had a very marked extension of her lip lesions, even though she felt much better in general. Subsequent addition of vitamin B₂ resulted in marked healing of her lesions. This is the example of a person whose tissues had received permanent damage from the vitamin deficiency; and an excellent natural diet, one which gave her an improved sense of well being, was not good enough to control a long established vitamin deficiency without additional vitamins. . . .

Better nutrition

Though we cannot hope in all cases to prevent disease and even death, when the inherited susceptibility is great, we can confidently expect to raise our individual resistance by better nutrition. The fact that we will get sick shouldn't discourage us, because on a poor diet we probably would have been sicker. The fact that an individual stays well on a poor diet doesn't mean he wouldn't be more productive and for a longer time if he were on a better diet.

Our criteria

In conclusion then when we think of whether a food is good for us or not let's ask the question, "good for what?" What are our criteria? If we select our diet to give us the maximum of health then we can possibly expect to enjoy a healthier life.

If you are emotionally adjusted to your life situation, get enough rest and exercise, and still don't feel well, then you should be sure that you do not have some illness. Then again there may be certain constitutional problems peculiar to you as an individual which prevents you from having optimum health, even though on a good diet. Among these we discussed situations in which irreversible damage has already been done requiring special dietary measures, the possibility of the presence of food allergies and inherited susceptibilities.

You can confidently expect to avoid many of the troubles that beset mankind if you will follow a good nutritional program.

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