



Caveman Diet vs. the Mediterranean Diet: Who's Right?

When it comes to nutrition, it can get very confusing. Patients often vent their confusion to me by claiming "The information is always changing! I don't know what to believe!" In their ensuing frustration, they often abandon a wholesome way of eating for the S.A.D. A program which stands for the Standard American Diet. It is well known that the S.A.D. Diet is, in part, responsible for heart disease, cancer, diabetes and a host of other public health issues. Among developed countries, the United States has the most obese and overweight people. According to Jean Lemaire, Wharton professor of insurance and actuarial science, Americans are much heavier than they were 10 years ago and much heavier than other people around the world. Professor Lemaire further states: Life expectancy in the U.S., which is among the richest countries, only ranks 48th in the world. Being overweight is comparable to having diabetes or having high blood pressure. To further illustrate the problem, A report published in the Journal of Health Affairs, found that individuals who are obese have 30 to 50 percent more chronic medical problems than those who smoke or drink heavily. Clearly, finding a better way is, to me, a national emergency.

To cut through the confusion, let's define what we mean by "diet" and talk about 2 popular nutrition regimen's and let you decide what may be right for you. But to be clear, it seems that the "new" diets that we are bombarded with in the news and magazines are really just fads. They are not sustainable and in many cases, people have worse health after they discontinue the diet.

However, after almost 20 years in natural medicine, I believe there is no confusion. The fact is that the foundation of any diet that provides optimal health is based on ancient wisdom and traditional diets that have not changed for thousands, if not tens of thousands of years. With all the complexities in the world, I feel simplicity and returning to the root of good nutrition is the best hope for a healthy lifestyle.

So what do I mean by "diet"? According to the dictionary, diet is the customary amount and kind of food and drink taken by a person from day to day; more narrowly, a diet planned to meet specific requirements of the individual, including or excluding certain foods. It is not necessarily about weight loss. When looking at diet, it should be a way of eating that becomes a lifestyle. It should be a sustainable habit, easy to follow, nutritious and impart optimal health benefits. This excludes short term eating changes, dietary restriction, starvation or sacrifice. If the diet you follow nourishes you, equally, on ALL levels, physically, physiologically and emotionally, I would call this a healthy diet.

Two popular concepts that I believe are sustainable in modern life are the Paleolithic Diet or Caveman diet and the Mediterranean diet. While they seem to be very different, they do agree on key points. It is up to each individual to research and find what kind of a healthy diet can be sustained for the rest of one's life. As I preach in my Wellness Practice, you must also take into account the individual, their health status and specific needs in their diet. This is exactly why we get significant weight loss and improved health in our clinic...because everyone is an individual.

The Paleo Diet is a nutritional plan based on the ancient diet of wild plants and animals that our ancestors consumed over 10,000 years ago. Support for this diet is based on the published scientific surveys known as the Kitava Study from 1989, which studied tribes in Papua New Guinea. These tribes ate a pre-westernized diet of 55-65% animal foods and 35-45% plant foods. They discovered that these societies had no stroke, heart disease, diabetes or hypertension. The diet consists mainly of fish, grass-fed pasture raised meats, vegetables, fruits, roots, spices and nuts. There is no restriction on number of calories and the foods can be cooked. It excludes grains, legumes, dairy products, salt, refined sugar, high glycemic foods and processed oils. Clinical trials that compared the Paleolithic Diet to commonly prescribed diets for Type 2 Diabetes determined that the Paleo diet was more effective resulting in lower blood sugar levels and HbA1c (a marker for long term blood sugar control), lower triglycerides, lowered blood pressure and lower body mass index. The Paleo diet is superb for weight loss, insulin problems and excels above other diets such as calorie restriction or the ADA diet. There have not been a large amount of studies on the Paleo Diet but those that are available have shown great results. A good source for more information on this diet can be found at www.PaleoDiet.com.



The Mediterranean Diet, on the other hand, is inspired by the traditional dietary patterns of southern Italy, Crete and much of Greece. The principle aspects include a diet high in olive oil consumption, high consumption of legumes, unrefined cereals, fruits, vegetables and moderate consumption of dairy (mostly cheese and yogurt), moderate to high consumption of fish, low consumption of meat and meat products and moderate wine consumption.

The benefits of this type diet have been studied much more extensively than the Paleo Diet and the results are astounding as well. A 10 year study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that this type of diet was associated with a 50% lowering of early death rates. The Lyon Diet Heart Study found that mortality from all causes while strictly adhering to a Mediterranean diet was reduced by 70%! Other studies reported reductions in cancer, stroke, diabetes cardiovascular disease and more. The benefits, again, are far beyond that of old beliefs of just calorie restriction and exercise.

While both diets have benefits, here are some of the highlighted differences:

Swedish researchers reported recently that a Paleolithic diet was more satiating than a Mediterranean-style diet, when compared on a calorie-for-calorie basis in heart patients. Both groups of study subjects reported equal degrees of satiety, but the Paleo dieters ended up eating 24% fewer calories over the 12-week study.

A Published study in Science Daily in 2007 showed that foods of the kind that were consumed during human evolution may be the best choice to control diabetes type 2. A study from Lund University, Sweden, found markedly improved capacity to handle carbohydrate after eating such foods for three months.

A recent analysis of more than 1.5 million healthy adults demonstrated that following a Mediterranean diet was associated with a reduced risk of overall and cardiovascular mortality, a reduced incidence of cancer and cancer mortality, and a reduced incidence of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases.

British Medical Journal published a 2008 study of non-diabetic participants on a Mediterranean style diet that had a 35 percent reduction in risk for developing diabetes due to changing eating patterns.

In a clinical study published in 2007, a group of researchers compared 14 patients who were advised to consume an 'ancient' (Paleolithic, 'Old stone Age') diet for three months with 15 patients who were recommended to follow a Mediterranean-like prudent diet with whole-grain cereals, low-fat dairy products, fruit, vegetables and refined fats generally considered healthy. All patients had increased blood sugar after carbohydrate intake (glucose intolerance), and most of them had overt diabetes type 2. In addition, all had been diagnosed with coronary heart disease. Patients in the Paleolithic group were recommended to eat lean meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, root vegetables and nuts, and to avoid grains, dairy foods and salt.

The main result was that the blood sugar rise in response to carbohydrate intake was markedly lower after 12 weeks in the Paleolithic group (-26%), while it barely changed in the Mediterranean group (-7%). At the end of the study, all patients in the Paleolithic group had normal blood glucose. While the benefits of a Mediterranean diet are clear, this indicates that the Paleo Diet may be better for blood sugar control.

There are definitely benefits to either diet and there are clear points that BOTH Diets agree upon and I think it is wise advice. Namely, processed foods are killing all of us. For example, in 2009, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), a non-profit watchdog group, found that nearly one in three of 55 brand-name foods contained mercury. The chemical was found most commonly in high fructose corn syrup-containing dairy products, dressings and condiments. Other studies find toxic mineral oils in boxed foods as well as pesticides and genetically modified grains abound that are damaging us in untold ways including genetic mutation we are passing along to the next generation. Therefore we have to get back to the basics. Fresh produce, fruits, and lean meats, anything made by nature directly. We are consuming way too much of the bad kind of carbohydrates. There is not adequate fiber in our diet programs, and too many of the wrong fats. All processed food should be eliminated from our diet, that is a 20th century occurrence and our body is not use to handling them.

In the end it is our genes that decide our requirements nutritionally, and we are not living in compliance with them. In the end, there is a divide as to which diet is "best". HOWEVER no one disagrees that if you eat as close to what nature has provided us you will bring equilibrium back to your body – simple!



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