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a23. Does the So-Called Anti-Diabetic Diet Actually Increase the Risk of Diabetes?

Copied by Dr. Victor Jean Ouellette

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By Jack Challem

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During the 1990s, the incidence of adult-onset (type 2) diabetes jumped by more than one third among Americans - and by more than 70 percent among people in their 30s. The disease, characterized by abnormally high levels of blood sugar, accelerates the aging process and significantly increases the risk of heart disease, kidney failure, nerve damage, and blindness. Now, researchers and physicians are shifting their focus to prediabetes - subtle unhealthy changes that precede full-blown adult-onset diabetes. The reason? Two major studies found that small increases in blood sugar significantly boost the risk of diabetes and death from heart disease.

Which Diet is Best?

Poor eating habits are the most obvious cause of adult-onset diabetes, but dietary recommendations can be as different as night and day. The American Diabetes Association promotes a "diabetes food pyramid," recommending that people eat six or more daily servings of grains, beans, and starchy vegetables. The emphasis is similar to the USDA food pyramid, which calls for 6-11 daily servings of grains.

The problem with such a diet, according to nutritionist Melissa Diane Smith and author of *Going Against the Grain*, is that large amounts of carbohydrates create havoc with blood sugar levels, ultimately increasing the risk of diabetes.

Loren Cordain, Ph.D., a researcher at Colorado State University, Ft. Collins, contends that people are best suited to a traditional hunter-gatherer diet, consisting of lean meats, fish, and a lot of vegetables. Grains didn't enter the diet until about 10,000 years ago and, like beans and starchy vegetables, provide mostly carbohydrates, not a lot of protein, vitamins, and minerals.

Too Many Carbs

Two-thirds of the carbohydrates Americans consume consist of highly refined carbohydrates and sugars that supply few if any other nutrients. Rather than load up on carbohydrate calories, it makes more sense to emphasize nutrient density. That means getting the most concentrated and diverse selection of nutrients at every meal and with each bite of food.

For example, fish provides protein and beneficial omega-3 fats. Similarly, nonstarchy vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, salad greens) and fruit (berries and apples) provide fiber and diverse selection of vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals. In fact, such foods do not trigger diabetes-like jumps in blood sugar and insulin.

A protein-rich nutrient-dense diet is not the same as controversial high-protein diets for weight loss. Smith recommends filling the grain gap with nonstarchy or low-starch vegetables and fruit. Indeed, a recent study by American and Lebanese researchers found that a relatively high-protein and high-vegetable diet was far better than a high-carbohydrate diet in treating overweight prediabetic patients.

Still other research suggests that vegetables and other whole foods can help turn the tide against diabetes. Jaakko Tuomilehto, M.D., of Finland's National Public Health Institute, asked 522 overweight and prediabetic men and women to follow a diet with more vegetables and fiber, monounsaturated fat, whole grains, and light exercise. After three years, subjects who received individualized nutritional counseling lowered their risk of diabetes by 58 percent.

A case history may not make for a study, but it can illustrate the difference the right diet makes. Alden D. Hilton, M.D., and Timothy A. Hursh, M.D., of Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota, recently described the case of a helicopter pilot diagnosed with diabetes. According to the doctors' article in *Aviation, Space, and Environmental Medicine*, the pilot adopted a high protein, low-carbohydrate diet and began taking walks four days a week. After three months, he lost 35 pounds and his blood sugar approached normal levels.

There's another good reason to cut back on starchy and high-glycemic foods. According to research by Simin Liu, M.D., Ph.D., of the Harvard Medical School such "low-quality carbohydrates" boost insulin levels (a prediabetic sign) and C-reactive protein, an inflammation-causing compound involved in diabetes and heart disease. Based on the evidence, it's much better to strictly limit such foods in the diet.

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jack@syndrome-x.com
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