

PHONY FOODS

by Carrie Demers, MD

In the past few years TV journalists, writers, talk show hosts, health officials, and politicians have tried to pin down the causes of what they call “America’s surging obesity epidemic.” They’ve scrutinized our high-calorie diet and our sedentary lifestyle, blamed it on our genes, and reexamined the concept of “emotional eating.” It’s true that all of these contribute to our bulging waistline, but an important component of the obesity problem has been overlooked: we overeat because we are undernourished.

Our mainstream diet—full of processed, refined, and chemically altered foods—contains too many calories and not enough nutrients. As we digest these foods our bodies use up more nutrients than they are taking in, and as a result we keep on eating in an attempt to satisfy our bodies’ minimum daily requirements for essential nutrients—even though we’ve already exceeded our ideal intake of calories. These excess calories turn into fat.

Over time, the combination of nutrition deficit, toxic wastes, and excess weight weakens our bodies and predisposes us to disease. In fact, well-documented studies show that refined and chemically altered foods not only cause us to gain weight, they also lead directly to other obesity-related problems: diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, high cholesterol, arthritis, and even certain types of cancer. Let’s take a closer look.

PHONY FOODS

Nature provides us with a huge variety of whole food. Some of it—fruits, nuts, berries, and many vegetables—can be picked, washed or hulled, and eaten just as is. Most of the others need only cooking and perhaps some seasoning to be delicious and digestible. Some of the grains need a bit of processing—cracking or grinding, perhaps. Isolating fats for cooking and seasoning requires pressing (in the case of oils) or churning (in the case of butter). But all of this is fairly simple—no refining, manufacturing, or packaging is required.

Yet today much of the food we eat comes to us by way of processing plants.

This is especially true of grains, sweeteners, and fats—many of which have been altered to make them tastier or to prolong their shelf life. The upshot? Fresh, nutritious foods have been replaced by refined, chemically altered, disease-promoting fare.

CARBS

White bread, donuts, bagels, pizza, crackers, cookies, pastries, pretzels, candy are our nation’s passions. But they are also our downfall—they are full of refined carbohydrates (sugars and starches) that have been separated from their original whole-food source and are almost devoid of nutrition. These are our comfort foods, but they are also the reason that carbs have gotten a bad rap in the past few years and why some of the most popular diets stress keeping carbohydrate intake to a minimum. But that logic is flawed: Nature intended carbohydrates to be our primary source of fuel and energy. As the director of Yale’s Prevention Research Center, David Katz, MD, puts it, it makes no sense to “equate lentils



Junk Food and Teens

Some studies show that teenagers, at the peak of their growth, get nearly half their calories from nutrient-poor refined carbohydrates. This is part of the reason why obesity, high cholesterol, hyperactivity, and behavior disorders are rampant in the under-18 crowd.

with lollipops, or oatmeal with Cheese Doodles.”

Studies show that a diet high in refined carbohydrates is deficient in the minerals, vitamins, and enzymes that keep the glands and organs healthy. In the absence of these nutrients the body is more apt to develop metabolic and endocrine abnormalities such as thyroid disease, obesity, high cholesterol, and depression. On the other hand, no studies have shown that natural whole-foods carbohydrates cause any problems at all. Cutting them out (as Atkins and some other diets do) invites trouble.

Beans, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables are considered “high-carb” foods, but they also contain the bulk of the nutrients we need in our diets: B vitamins such as thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, vitamin B6 (pyridoxine), and folate; vitamins E, A, C, and K; many key minerals (calcium, iron, zinc, chromium, magnesium); as well as fat and protein. These nutrient-dense foods also contain fiber, which helps the body absorb carbohydrates slowly—and utilize them easily. Thus, we feel more satisfied with fewer calories and are less likely to overeat. The carbs to be wary of are refined sugars and refined flours.

White sugar. Unadulterated sugar cane juice contains B vitamins, chromium, and magnesium—the 87 nutrients that play a role in sugar regulation in the body. And it is absorbed slowly. By contrast, refined sugars are absorbed quickly, causing our blood sugar levels to spike and then plummet, and this in turn makes us feel tired, spacey, restless, and hungry. So we reach for a snack—chips, a pastry, a candy bar, some crackers—and the process starts all over again. This roller-coaster reaction is exacerbated by the depleting effect these “empty calories” have on our bodies—over time they render the insulin-regulating mechanisms defective and make us prone either to diabetes or to hypoglycemia.

High fructose corn syrup. It’s in everything—from soda, fruit drinks, and flavored water to



Well-documented studies show that refined carbohydrates can...

- aggravate or cause heart disease and stroke by increasing blood cholesterol, triglycerides, and platelet stickiness
- contribute to insulin resistance, diabetes, and metabolic syndrome by increasing insulin levels
- increase the incidence of ulcers by raising gastric acidity

And preliminary evidence shows that they contribute to...

- cancer
- kidney disease
- decreased life span
- bone loss
- dental decay
- gall bladder disease
- candida overgrowth
- constipation
- addiction to coffee and tobacco
- hyperactivity
- violent behavior
- ADD/ADHD

baked goods, soups, and jams—and it’s far from natural. High fructose corn syrup is made from genetically modified corn and is processed with genetically modified enzymes in a complicated industrial process involving “vats of murky fermenting liquid, fungus, and chemical tweaking,” says food activist and writer Linda Joyce Forristal. And according to the Washington Post, preliminary research shows that high fructose corn syrup may have “unexpected nutritional consequences” associated with weight gain, insulin resistance, liver damage, and other problems.

Refined white flour. Bread has traditionally been called the “Staff of Life” because whole grains from which it is made are extremely nutrient-rich. In their natural state, grains contain sugars, carbohydrates, protein, fat, and fiber, as well as vitamins, minerals, and enzymes. In the refining process, the husk and germ are stripped from each grain of wheat, and the fiber, vitamins, and oils vanish along with it. All that’s left is the

endosperm, a quickstart fuel source intended to nourish the sprouts during their first week of life. By the time the stripped grain seeds are milled into refined flour, everything that was nutritionally beneficial in the whole grain is gone. Back in the 1940s, when scientists noticed that refined white flour had little nutrition, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) mandated that some nutrients be added back in. But the gain is negligible. Although the flour has been “fortified” with a few synthetic B vitamins, they are difficult to assimilate, and other nutrients such as oils and trace minerals have not been replaced.

FAT

Contrary to popular belief, fat is not bad for us. In fact, it’s an essential part of a healthy diet and plays an important role in weight regulation. It’s true that most Americans need to reduce their intake of fat, but the kind and quality we consume matters as much as the quantity.

Fat is a lubricant. Just as oil makes an engine run smoothly, fat facilitates the smooth functioning of the joints and the effortless movement of air through the lungs, and stool through the colon. Nearly half of the dry weight of the brain is fat. Fat is also a source of insulation, heat, and fuel. A fatty substance called myelin insulates nerves, while fat and cholesterol molecules transport and store fat-soluble vitamins and hormones. These are only a few of the ways that fats and oils are nurturing and protective. If we don’t get enough of them from healthy sources, problems arise.

But not all fats are created equal: some are good for us; some aren’t.

Essential Fatty Acids. The human body can manufacture most of the fats it needs, but there are two families of fatty acids that are critical to good health—the omega-3 family (which comes from alpha-linolenic acid) and the omega-6 family (which comes from linoleic acid). Because the body cannot make them on its own, a dietary source is “essential.” The primary source of omega-6 fatty acids is seeds and grains: sunflower, safflower, sesame, and corn oils are particularly rich sources, as are evening primrose and borage oils. Omega-3 fatty acids are found in dark green leafy vegetables, flax and hemp oils, and cold-water fish such as salmon. Other good sources of essential fatty acids include soybeans, walnuts, and pumpkin and sesame seeds.

Essential fatty acids help keep our weight in the healthy range by speeding up our metabolism. They also prevent water retention and create molecules (called prostaglandins) that help regulate blood pressure, keep blood vessels elastic, affect the stickiness of blood platelets, help metabolize cholesterol, regulate kidney function, govern bronchial dilation, modulate the inflammatory response, and support the immune system. When essential fatty acids are missing from our diets, the body begins to deteriorate and is prone to obesity and chronic degenerative diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease.



Saturated fats have been linked to heart disease and cancer, right?

Yes and no. Studies on animals in the 1960s linked artificially saturated fats with heart disease and cancer. But no studies have linked naturally saturated fats like butter, ghee, and coconut oil with these diseases.

Natural fats. Fats from natural sources are good for us (in moderation, of course). They contain essential fatty acids along with the fat-soluble vitamins A and E, lecithin, chlorophyll, and minerals such as calcium, magnesium, iron, and copper. These fats come in three forms: saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated.

Saturated fats—butter, lard, and coconut oil, for example—are solid at room temperature. They have gotten a bad name in the past few decades, but these dense, stable fats are the best choice for cooking—they withstand heat without deteriorating, and stay fresh for a relatively long time.

Monounsaturated oils such as olive, canola, sesame, peanut, and walnut are liquid at room temperature, but thicken when chilled. They are relatively stable and can be heated at moderate temperatures without breaking down. Polyunsaturated oils such as safflower, corn, sunflower, and soy remain liquid even when chilled. They should not be used in cooking and are healthy only when fresh and unrefined. They become rancid quickly when not stored properly, and when they are exposed to heat, light, oxygen, and moisture during storage, cooking, or refining, polyunsaturated oils quickly break down into “free radicals.” Free radicals are negatively charged molecules that wreak havoc wherever they go, damaging blood vessel linings and initiating the buildup of plaque that leads to heart disease. Free radicals also damage tissues and organs, setting the stage for tumors, cataracts, arthritis, autoimmune diseases, and Parkinson’s disease.

Your best bet with both monounsaturated and polyunsaturated oils is to buy organic, cold-pressed, unrefined oils that smell and taste like the seed from which they were pressed. When stored in opaque bottles in cool environments out of direct sun, they retain their healthy qualities for several months.

Unnatural fats. Because they tend to be unstable, oils have long been a problem for the food industry. Did you know that most of the bland, clear, odorless oils on your supermarket

Three Best Saturated Fats

Ghee

Ghee is clarified butter made by simmering unsalted butter until the water it contains evaporates and the milk solids (the cheesy part that burns when you try to cook with it) precipitate out. What is left is a healthful, tasty alternative to other cooking oils. For centuries ghee has been used in the East, where it is thought to magnify the properties of the food it is combined with. It is also used as a medium for medicines. When studies in India showed that heart disease was on the rise, ghee was initially thought to be the culprit. Further investigation revealed that the families with more heart disease had been replacing ghee with “modern” shortenings and hydrogenated oils.

Butter

Butter is full of antioxidants and cancer-preventing trace minerals such as selenium, as well as fat-soluble vitamins A and D. It also contains butyric and lauric fatty acids, which have antifungal, antibacterial, and anticarcinogenic properties. (And it tastes good!)

Coconut Oil

Coconut oil is rich in lauric acid, also found in human breast milk. Because it has strong antifungal and antimicrobial properties, coconut oil protects us from viruses, yeasts, and bacteria that can cause illness. Coconut oil also has antitumor properties and contributes to the health of the immune system. Studies show that as tropical populations in developing countries switch from coconut oil to refined polyunsaturated oils, the incidence of intestinal disorders and immune deficiency rises.

shelves have been processed to increase their shelf life? And, as Udo Erasmus writes in *Fats that Heal, Fats that Kill*, “Fully processed oils are the equivalent of refined sugars.... Like sugar, they are nutrient-deficient sources of calories.” Most of the oils sold in the supermarket and used in restaurants have been degummed, heated, bleached, and deodorized. These refining processes rob the oil of its nutrients—vitamin A, vitamin E, beta carotene, lecithin, chlorophyll, calcium, magnesium, iron, and copper—and destroy most essential fatty acids.

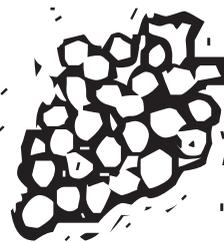
Refining processes also denature the oil through heat and chemical exposure, introducing foreign toxic molecules that tax the liver and damage the nervous and immune systems. For example, because many natural oils go rancid quickly, manufacturers have learned to convert them into saturated fats by the chemical process of hydrogenation. These artificially saturated fats, known as trans-fatty acids, rarely occur in nature. Trans fats are synthetic and indigestible. A prime example is margarine, which is made from hydrogenated vegetable oil. Hydrogenated oils are more solid than the natural oils they are derived from, they do not spoil, and they can be added to almost any food that is to be packaged or bottled. (Hence the ageless Twinkie.)

Trans fats are everywhere—from dehydrated soups to frozen pizzas to some veggie burgers in health food stores. Read almost any packaging label and you will see, “May contain the following

oils: partially hydrogenated soy, cottonseed, or palm kernel oil.” Recent guidelines from the FDA urge Americans to keep their trans fat intake to a minimum and is requiring manufacturers to list trans fats on food labels by 2006.

BACK TO NATURE

Nature gives us food in abundance: root vegetables, leafy greens, tubers, squashes, crucifers, peas, and beans in all shapes and sizes as well as nuts, herbs, a hearty variety of cereal grains, and an awesome assortment of berries and other fruits. Our fellow creatures provide us with eggs, honey, and milk, and with a little low-tech effort, we can make yogurt, kefir, cheese, butter, and ghee. A diet made up of these whole natural foods contains a balance of the three major nutrients— carbohydrate, fat, and protein—along with the vitamins, minerals, and fiber we need to stay healthy. What is more, our bodies break whole foods down into amino acids, simple sugars, and fat molecules slowly, keeping our blood sugar stable so we are less likely to overeat. And because we are satisfied longer, we are less likely to snack between meals.



In the ten years I have been practicing holistic medicine, I have come to the conclusion that the best way to lose weight is to adopt a whole-foods approach to eating. All of the patients in my practice who chronically overeat are wedded to a highly refined, mainstream diet. They eat breads, pasta, and pastries made with hydrogenated oils and refined sugar and flour. With the exception of fruits and a few vegetables, almost everything they eat comes out of a box or package—or it is purchased from a restaurant or fast-food emporium.

In addition to being overweight, most of these patients have one or more health problems: high blood pressure, high levels of LDL cholesterol (the “bad” kind), low levels of HDL

Trans fats are linked with...

- cancer
- heart disease
- diabetes
- infertility
- decreased breast milk production
- decreased immune function
- obesity
- higher levels of “bad” (LDL) cholesterol and lower levels of “good” (HDL) cholesterol

cholesterol (the “good” kind), thyroid problems, diverticulitis, arthritis, type 2 diabetes, digestive problems, infertility, and fatigue. When they switch to a whole-foods diet, they not only lose weight, their thyroid function improves, arthritis pain diminishes, blood pressure drops, immune function improves, bad cholesterol drops, energy increases, and good cholesterol rises.

This doesn’t happen overnight, of course. It takes months and sometimes years—partly because radical changes in eating habits don’t come easily. Reeducating the palate often proves to be the biggest challenge. When people are accustomed to the strong tastes of artificially processed food and the bland tastes of bread and pasta made with refined flour, it takes time and patience to develop a taste for the more subtle and vital flavors of natural foods. One way to begin is by replacing refined white flour with whole-grain flour. The earthier, richer flavor of whole-wheat breads and pastas will eventually prove to be more satisfying. Another starting point is to make a meal from fresh food once or twice a week. People will often enjoy shopping for food that is as close to its natural state as possible. They discover that fresh, natural ingredients require more chewing, but this releases their rich, subtle flavors slowly, and the meals are deeply satisfying. Then they begin to

notice that, in contrast, the highly processed food they have been accustomed to requires little chewing and loses its flavor quickly, so they swallow it quickly and go on to the next bite. Gradually they become aware that even though they are eating plenty of food, they are still unsatisfied when the meal is over. They begin to look forward to their whole-foods meals and to notice that the extra chewing and tasting means they eat less and enjoy the food more.

At some point these people begin to replace refined sugar with honey, maple syrup, and succanat. And they start to shy away from tasteless refined vegetable oils in favor of aromatic olive oil, sesame oil, and peanut oil. Little by little, refined sugar and flour, denatured oils, processed foods, and foods containing additives and preservatives disappear from their diets. And so does the desire to eat between meals, the feeling of never being quite satisfied after finishing a meal, the chronically low energy and—mercifully—those extra pounds.

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