

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Diet and Nutrition Recommendations have a History of Being Wrong”

Most people try to eat a so-called “healthy diet”, which is presumably based on solid scientific studies. Sadly, the history of dietary recommendations has a long history littered with errors. In the 1940s, the USDA was emphasizing the Basic Seven, with a focus on bread/flour/cereals, butter or margarine, and at least 2 cups of milk a day. The 1984 Food Wheel and 1992 Food Guide Pyramid still relied heavily on bread, grains, and cereals (6-11 servings per day), but increased emphasis on fruits and vegetables (5-9 servings per day) while warning that fats and oils should only be eaten sparingly. Not until 2005 did the USDA transition to diet personalization, moderation, and proportion, with a first-time emphasis on the value of oils. Currently, the entire concept of a healthy diet has been flipped on its head. Cholesterol, once definitely labeled as bad, can now be good or bad. Carbohydrates, once the foundation of food recommendations, now might be implicated in the increased prevalence of obesity and diabetes, though whole grains still provide a variety of potential health benefits. And, in a complete turnaround, certain fats and oils, once considered among the greatest of food evils, have demonstrated cardiovascular benefit. Experts had high hopes that helping men learn how to buy, prepare, and consume seven servings of vegetables a day might slow prostate cancer from advancing. But, a two-year Men’s Eating and Living (MEAL) study, which is the first multi-institutional, randomized phase 3 clinical trial of a diet intervention for prostate cancer, revealed that adopting a diet heavy with vegetables did not slow prostate cancer progression among men with low-risk disease who were on active surveillance. The goal was to increase daily vegetable intake to seven servings, with a serving being roughly equivalent to a cup of vegetables. Many epidemiological studies have pointed to the benefits of fruit and vegetable intake high in vitamin E, selenium, beta carotene, lycopene, and other micronutrients, and a diet low in animal fat. However, an expert said, “several pivotal studies have taken the bloom off the rose of prevention.” He highlighted the SELECT trial, which found not only that there was no benefit to supplements but also that supplements actually increased the risk of developing prostate cancer. A 2004 study with a large observational group of more than 130,000 men that found no significant association between fruit and vegetable intake, including consumption of cruciferous vegetables, and prostate cancer. There appears to be dwindling hope that dietary approaches will prevent or slow cancer.

In the America that I love, they now say that an egg a day is good for your heart. Use common sense and enjoy your food and live your life to its fullest.

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