

5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

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Food is a noisy subject. There are so many conflicting ideas about nutrition in books and on the internet, and it seems like a new fad diet comes out every other day. *Can you really trust any of it?* It's a common vexation and one of the largest obstacles our community members face in pursuit of health and happiness.

As you can see from the title of this article, we've compiled a list of beneficial habits around food. We've added to the noise. It's only prudent, then, that we also address the vexation.

Can you really trust any of what you read about food? Of course you can. The mountains of misinformation and non-expert testimony in the public eye do not negate the existence of truth. They just bury it. We have to dig, and we have to sort.

One of the best ways to tell if a food- or other health-related behavior is beneficial, is to ask the question, "Has it held up over time and across populations?" In other words, if different groups of humans have

behaved in a specific way for a loooooong period of time (more than a couple thousand years, certainly) in the absence of significant disease or death, then the behavior is probably beneficial.

There are food-related behaviors humans rely on for good health. They formed over an eternity of evolutionary grooming, not all of a sudden. Yes, there were certain events throughout history, like the discovery of fire (discussed below), that caused accelerated, paradigm-shifting changes to our reliances, but the changes still happened over hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of years, not tens or hundreds. Furthermore, the new behaviors were an improvement from the old - they allowed our energy input (from eating food) to increase and our energy output (from activity procuring food, ensuring safety, sustaining life, etc.) to decrease so that more energy could be devoted to growth, repair, and that universal goal of species proliferation.

What has happened in only the last century, with

5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

industrialization, seems different - we've gone too far too quickly. In an evolutionary millisecond, we've gone from hunting, gathering, and preparing a day's food to sitting all day at a computer while truckloads of prepared food are brought to our cold feet. Energy input currently far exceeds energy output. It might seem like this change is beneficial - we should have even *more* energy left over for reproduction, growth, and repair - but the research doesn't bear that idea out. Excess energy is being stored in unprecedented amounts of fat and fueling immune system hyperactivity. Our reproductive fitness is going down as the prevalences of obesity, cardiometabolic diseases, and cancers goes up.

It's unlikely that these new, industrialized-human behaviors will result in anything but misfortune for our species. Only massive amounts of time will tell, but you and your children and grandchildren certainly can't wait around for the results to come in. If you want to be healthy and happy now, look for behaviors that were common amongst your hunter-gatherer and farmer ancestors and have withstood the test of time

(humans have hunted and gathered for over 2 million years and farmed for about 12,000 years, compared to a hundred or so years of industrialized behavior). Look back, way back, and ask, "What worked?"

That's what we hoped to do with this article. It identifies a few time-tested behaviors - borrowed from anthropology and cross-cultural psychology resources about eating and metabolism - and frames them as a simple set of guidelines that our community members can follow today. Since we are Traditional Eastern Medicine physicians, we also looked at the topic through the lens of that medicine, which has a documented, loooooong history (about 5,000 years) of helping humans stay healthy. Its foundation was formed around about the time that another major shift in food-related behavior was happening to many humans around the globe: the switch from hunting-gathering to farming.

The ancestor we want to emulate would have been a non-industrialized hunter-gatherer/farmer with no chronic diseases or unhealthy body fat. *What were her food rules?* That's what we want to know.



5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS



1. Eat a variety of foods

The ancestor ate what the earth provided, which included a diverse set of foods, many of which changed from season to season, place to place. As Michael Pollan lays out in his excellent book *In Defense of Food*, industrialization of our food chain has driven the modern diet dangerously toward simplification. Humankind as a whole has historically eaten about 80,000 species of food, some 3,000 of which have been used across many populations. Today, only four crops - corn, soy, wheat, and rice - account for a whopping two thirds of what we eat in the industrialized world. “Why should this concern us?” Pollan writes. “Because humans are omnivores, requiring somewhere between fifty and a hundred different chemical compounds and elements in order to be healthy. It’s hard to believe we’re getting everything we need from a diet consisting largely of processed corn, soybeans, rice, and wheat.” We must move back in the direction of complexity. We must restore variety to the foods we eat.

2. Be a local, natural snob

OK, our ancestors probably weren’t food-snobs. That’s our thing. BUT, have you ever eaten a naturally grown, ripe strawberry fresh from the vine? Wowza! There are few moments in life so full of flavor. When you take something like that and make it scarce, you create a snob.

Fresh, ripe fruits and vegetables, which are foods of the highest nutritional value, are now scarce. Two modern factors made them so: commercialization and industrial processing.

Commercial fruits and vegetables are often harvested before they are fully developed (the green bananas in the supermarket?) then transported many miles away to be eaten far from their source and long after leaving the earth. Over time and distance, the underdeveloped foods lose what little vitality they had, so the nutritional value to the consumer is limited.

Many of today’s foods are also genetically altered, processed, and/or treated with chemicals. These practices significantly reduce the good attributes of a



5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

food and even introduce some bad attributes, factors that promote harm instead of health.

Local and natural was all our ancestor's knew. Because of the world you live in, if you want to eat like the ancestors, you have to become a local, natural snob. Seriously, be downright disagreeable about buying anything other than local foods that have been grown, harvested, and handled with natural, proven-safe practices.

Better yet, grow them yourself!

3. Cook your foods, hominin!



Over 400,000 years ago, our hominin (human) ancestors began outsourcing some of their metabolic needs. As Herman Ponzer describes in his groundbreaking new book about metabolism, *Burn*, the discovery of fire allowed our hunter-gatherer ancestors to begin cooking foods, increasing the amount of energy consumed per bite and decreasing energy spent on digestion.

When you cook a food, the energy captured as heat changes the food's chemistry and structure. Proteins are easier to digest, meat is easier to chew, and starches are no longer indigestible. We get twice as many calories from a cooked potato as we get from a raw one.

Over time, a dependence on fire was built into our bodies. "Our own metabolism was no longer enough. We became reliant on a second, external energy source, fire, to power our lives," Ponzer writes. "Every culture ever recorded cooks their food." Our digestive capabilities are now reduced, but as a result, we have more energy for growth, reproduction, repair, and our very large brains.

"But what about the Raw Foodists," you may ask. "They seem like a passionate group, and don't they get, like, *tons* more energy from their foods?" No, they don't. According to a study of over 300 men and women following raw food diets in Germany, they have a hard time maintaining healthy body weight, and their reproductive function is often compromised, sometimes with loss of libido. The Raw Foodists are

5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

struggling and flying in the face of hundreds of thousands of years of evolutionary adaptations. Don't join them.

Embrace fire, put the salad down, cook your foods. Be a hominin. It's a big, accomplished group, and you're a lifelong member.

4. Know when to stop



As we mentioned in the introduction to this article, a big problem in our industrialized society is that, for many humans, energy input far exceeds energy output. The abundance of high calorie foods in our environment combined with our largely sedentary lifestyles causes us to consume more calories than we burn, an imbalance that has produced epidemics of obesity and cardiometabolic diseases.

If you think the solution is to increase output by dialing up physical activity, you're not alone. For years, many health advocates have insisted that exercise is the golden ticket to weight loss and wellbeing. Here is our response to that recommendation: *Do it! If you haven't*

been exercising, start. If you already exercise, keep it up. It's enormously important for your health, and there's no replacement for it. But it's not the whole solution.

The reason why exercise isn't the golden ticket we all hoped it would be has to do with the theory of *Constrained Daily Energy Expenditure*. That's the main subject of Pontzer's book, *Burn*, which contains the subtitle *New Research Blows the Lid Off How We Really Burn Calories, Stay Healthy, and Lose Weight*. It turns out that increasing our physical activity alone does not, in the long run, cause us to burn significantly more calories than we consume - which is the only way to lose weight. The human body compensates. It is a smart machine with an ability to maintain energy expenditure within a very narrow range, even as physical activity goes up and down. Exactly how the body does this is not fully clear yet, but it makes sense. When food is scarce, as it has been at many times throughout history, an organism that can conserve energy (either energy coming in from food or energy stored in fat), even when activity



5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

ramps up, is more likely to survive a long time and produce multiple offspring.

What seems clear, as Pontzer lays out, is that the human body compensates for increased energy needs from physical activity by reducing energy going to other areas. This is why exercise is so important for our health. When we over consume, excess calories go toward non-essential activities (such as additional immune system and reproductive system activities) which increase our risk of cardiometabolic diseases and cancers. When we increase physical activity, we cause that energy to be diverted away from these harmful activities. *Do it.*



But exercise doesn't actually solve the problem of overconsumption. In fact, it often makes it worse. As we turn up the physical activity, our brains turn up signals of hunger - another useful little survival mechanism - so we tend to eat more. Since humans are incredibly bad at keeping tabs on how much food we take in, all of this happens to us without much awareness. So good luck trying to control it.

In order to solve the problems of overconsumption and obesity, we have to... (you guessed it)...eat less. It's the only way. You can start by avoiding many of the calorie-packed, processed foods lining the supermarket aisles today. Whole foods, especially those with a lot of fiber like roots and leaves, deliver fewer calories per bite. You can also avoid highly palatable foods that drive you to eat more → feel happy. Let bland be your friend; your less-than-exciting, but highly nurturing friend.

More importantly, you have to *know when to stop eating*, and, as you've probably experienced, that can be difficult. Our guts tell us when they're full, but during a meal, it can take up to 25 minutes for their signals reach our brains to deliver the news. Most Americans clear their plates in less time than that.



The hands-down, best way to avoid over consuming is to slow down. That way you can listen carefully to what your stomach has to say and stop when it says "full" instead of when you see an empty plate. Leave more time for meals, chew your food, eat with slow eaters... do whatever you can to slow down the

5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

experience. And when that doesn't work, switch to a smaller size plate.



Modern humans, especially the industrialized ones, tend to ignore internal cues of fullness and rely instead on external cues (an empty dinner plate) to know when to stop eating. It's a glitch, for sure, but you can actually exploit it to help you eat less... Just switch to a smaller sized plate. Smaller surface area = less food volume. This is quite a beautiful meal-time hack because it's effortless... No need to fight that deeply entrenched habit you have to empty your dinner plate. Just shrink the plate!

PS: You might also want to leave serving dishes in the kitchen, away from the meal table, so that you're not tempted to pile more food onto your now-empty plate without thinking. Sure, you can still walk to the kitchen, but at least you'll be adding a few steps and a couple conscious moments into your routine.

5. Never throw ice on your fire



Inside your body, a gentle fire burns. It's part of a system responsible for maintaining the interior temperature within a very narrow range, outside of which, cellular activities cease and organs fail.

When you're exposed to something cold, like winter weather, the system turns up the heat to keep your body warm. That extra heat costs you energy. The same thing happens when you drink something cold or eat a cold food. Your body has to use energy to warm it up. In our ancestors' world, the internal fire was carefully protected and these exposures would have been avoided whenever possible. They were much too risky.

In our world, where external energy sources seem endlessly abundant (they're really not, just wait), it's easy to imagine that your internal fire will burn bright for an eternity. But it won't. Every time your body has to use extra energy to warm something up, some other activity - like digestion, reproduction, or repair -

5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

loses energy. You can imagine the consequences. Eventually your fire will start to go out.

Protect your fire. Eat and drink nothing cooler than room temperature.

BONUS ADVICE 1.

Discover your personal “dietary tilt”



If you're a perfectly balanced human being, like the ancestor, the five basic eating habits above (aka. a *varied* and *moderate* diet) are probably all you need to maintain health. Most modern humans, however, are not perfectly balanced. As a result of one thing or another, we've drifted off center health-wise, and before we can go back to the basics of eating, we need a little added dietary therapy.

Now it's time to start thinking of food like it's medicine, capable of producing an observable, physiological effect in the body. And, like medicine, observed effect varies from one kind of food to the next. From an Eastern Medicine perspective, the effect that a

particular food produces in the body is associated with specific properties within that food, such as its thermal nature (warming, cooling, neutral) and flavor (salty, sour, bitter, etc.). We call them a food's *therapeutic properties*. For example, cooling foods clear internal heat, salty foods moisten, and bitter foods purge downward. With a bit of help, you can begin to harness the therapeutic properties of food if you're someone who needs a little extra dietary action.

Before you jump in, however, consider the following advice: *Make no sudden or dramatic moves!*

For example, if you're overweight or obese, please don't skip meals; you'll just deprive the body of what it needs to normalize. Or if you're running really hot inside, please don't eat a bunch of cooling foods to compensate; you'll just wind up internally cold.

What's needed is what Traditional Chinese Medicine food writer Daverick Legget calls a *tilt*, a gentle leaning in a desired direction for a sustained period of time. “[D]ietary remedies need to be gentle. A tilt...will be of far greater benefit than a ‘binge’,” says Legget.

5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

Bonus Advice 1 is, *Find your personal dietary tilt*. For your reference, Legget's book *Helping Ourselves: A Guide to Traditional Chinese Food Energetics* is a charming and simple how-to manual about designing a therapeutic dietary tilt using a Traditional Chinese Medicine approach. Whatever approach you use, we have an additional piece of advice: *Consult a professional*. When it comes to using food as medicine, education and experience matter. If you don't have any of it on your team, you could end up wasting a lot of time and energy or even do yourself some harm. A professional will help guide you toward your goals.

If you choose to use Legget's book and a Chinese Medicine / Eastern Medicine approach, you'll need to start with a diagnosis from an experienced and licensed Chinese Medicine physician before you can use the book effectively. We can help you with that at Turtle Tree, and we usually have copies of Legget's book to borrow.

Finally, once you begin implementing your dietary tilt, please remember not to neglect other foods and



flavors. A stable tilt in any direction requires a strong and rooted base. That base is a varied, balanced diet.

BONUS ADVICE 2.

Think (don't think) outside the box



Healthy digestion depends on more than just our eating habits. It depends on our *thinking* habits and how often our routines activate our *parasympathetic nervous system*.

A quick aside...

The body's autonomic nervous system - the one that functions outside our conscious awareness and controls all internal body processes - has two branches: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. The sympathetic branch stimulates the body's fight or flight response while the parasympathetic branch predominates during quiet and restful activities. The two branches are antagonistic - while one is active, the other is dormant... (end aside)

The parasympathetic branch governs digestion. While

5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

it is in charge, the digestive organs receive ample blood supply and secretions, and the smooth muscle contracts regularly to move digestive material through properly. When the sympathetic branch takes over, blood is shunted away to other organs and digestive function declines. This is useful when we are running away from a lion or a bear - the muscles of the arms, legs, and heart are much more of a priority in that moment than are the bowels, which will probably be emptying. But it's not particularly useful when we are sitting in traffic, cleaning out the coffee filter, arguing with our partner over dinner, or during many of the other moments of modern sympathetic arousal, again and again, throughout our day.

Our ancestors probably didn't have this problem, so we need to change. How many of those moments can you turn into parasympathetic opportunities to rest and digest? Your tummy will thank you when you do. Come to think of it, your whole body will thank you, as will your loved ones, since a sympathetic-parasympathetic imbalance is another factor at the root of many chronic diseases today.

Activities such as lower abdominal breathing, slow walking, meditation, yoga, or tai ji quan are standard ways of adding some parasympathetic activity to your day. For some people, painting, playing music, or other art forms can serve this purpose.

For just about all of us, however, there are already activities in our daily lives - like folding clothes, washing dishes, gardening, cooking - that can be transformed into powerful parasympathetic tools simply by practicing some mindfulness while doing them. **Bonus Advice 2** is, *Turn ordinary daily activities into opportunities to rest and digest by doing them with presence and awareness instead of the usual mental chatter.* For therein lies the rub. While it's tempting to assume that stress is always imposed on us by some event or person on the outside, the truth is, our stress responses are governed entirely by what goes on inside our minds - when we're waiting in traffic, eating, talking to a co-worker, sitting still... even when a lion is chasing us down. Although, nobody's suggesting that you deep-breathe your way through that. **Bonus Advice 3:** *Run.*



5 SUCCESSFUL EATING HABITS OF OUR ANCESTORS

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