

How You Can Avoid Weight Gain by the American Institute for Cancer Research

If we ate more like cave dwellers of the Paleolithic era, could we reduce the obesity epidemic in America? According to several recent magazine articles and books, overweight was unknown among hunter-gatherers. Although they ate plenty of meat, along with fruits, vegetables and nuts, meat came from non-domesticated animals so it was lean, like today's venison.

Advocates for a primitive diet argue that our genes precede the coming of agricultural practices. They claim that avoiding bread and other grain products is the key to good health. Because grain foods are contrary to our genes' nutritional needs, they allegedly cause weight gain.

Inactivity is the Problem

Unfortunately, those who recommend a Paleolithic diet overlook an important part of good health: exercise. Our ancestors spent a lot of energy gathering plant foods and hunting game. Unlike us, they did not have cars, grocery stores or fast food chains.

A fundamental concept, established by years of research, says that if we eat more calories than we burn up with physical activity, we gain weight. Since we have become a nation that uses remote controls, stands on escalators and drives instead of walks, is it surprising people are gaining weight?

Overeating is another factor. Inevitably, our ancestors suffered periods of scarcity and famine. For cavemen, every extra bit of food consumed meant more work hunting or foraging. Before the 20th century, supersized fast-food meals were unheard of, as was snacking in front of the television. Animal and human studies show that having a wide variety of tempting foods readily available increases calorie consumption. Cavemen were not tempted by kitchens stocked with umpteen varieties of cookies, chips and ice cream.

Better Health Examples

Anthropologists think that cavemen developed less cancer and heart disease than we do because they died at a younger age before these chronic diseases had a chance to develop. For us, better models of healthy living are the traditional Asian and Mediterranean populations who lived long lives and had less obesity, heart disease and cancer than we do today.

In contrast to a caveman's diet, these people ate plenty of grain products like pasta, bread and rice. Compared to the typical American diet, the traditional Mediterranean or Asian diet included a great abundance of vegetables and fruits and lower consumption of saturated fat from fatty meats and rich dairy products.

These traditional diets mirror the eating approach advised by the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR). According to AICR's analysis of many studies, an ideal diet is

plant-based with a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans. Along with physical activity and appropriate portions, that's the best diet for our genes.
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