

Local

Cutting out fats in diet an unhealthy practice

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Do you ever crave fatty foods? Before you scold yourself for breaking another New Year's resolution, let's listen to what your body is saying. You may actually be deficient in essential fats.

A new patient of mine came in frustrated and fat-deprived. A few months back, his doctor told him to follow a strict low-fat regime or risk being put on a cholesterol-lowering drug at his next checkup. He was discouraged, as he had already limited fat intake. The last thing he wanted was another medication. He was tired of taking painkillers for knee osteoarthritis.

With a steely focus, he'd spent the next eight weeks after seeing his doctor rereading labels, finding fat-free products and low-fat whipped cream for the occasional treat. He cut out eggs and salad dressings, didn't use oil or butter and ate his veggies steamed. And now, he'd come to see me because his arthritis pain was worse than ever.

The "itis" in arthritis denotes inflammation and often means pain, swelling and impaired mobility in the joints. Fortunately, our food choices may flip the inflammatory cascade if we choose the fat that's fit to fight pain.

Omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids are essential because the body cannot manufacture them; food is the sole source. In our standard diets, omega-6 is plentiful in meats and animal products and in Manitoba sunflower, hemp and flaxseed oil. Omega-3 is in highest concentration in fish such as tuna, salmon and mackerel, as well as in sunflower, hemp, flax and nuts. The real nuts and bolts on this issue: Omega-3s decrease inflammation.

Over the last century, changes in the food pyramid fuelled fat phobias. Even health professionals incorrectly touted the avoidance of cholesterol-containing foods such as eggs. This was at the expense of consumers such as my patient, who instead chose fat-free products, thus depriving himself of necessary nutrients and the lip-smacking satiation that comes with a good fat. Despite the compelling advertising, the ingredient labels on most fat-free items don't lie. They are more sugar-filled, and they increase inflammation.

Many of us now know omega fats have merit, but it is often forgotten that the balance among them is even more important. Too much omega-6 can cause an omega-3 deficiency. Symptoms of a fatty acid deficiency can include more than fat cravings or stiffer joints. There can be dryness of skin, hair, eyes or fingernails, increased thirst or excessive ear wax. Low fatty acids can contribute to menstrual cramping and worsen depression. Take your hand and run it down the back skin of your upper arm. If you notice small bumps, that may be a sign of a fatty acid deficit.

For general balance, eating omega-3 foods such as hemp, flax and nuts is a start, but the body has to work harder to convert them to the anti-inflammatory form called EPA. Instead, you could choose fish twice weekly that contain EPA. No conversion required.

If you need added support for specific conditions like arthritis pain, I suggest a pure, high-potency omega-3 (not 3-6-9), high in EPA. Since people can be genetically predisposed to lower omega-3 levels (simply tested in DNA), I will often measure current fatty acid levels to further personalize the dose, which we did for my patient. By embracing the right fats in his regime, he not only avoided cholesterol medication but was able to reduce his dose of painkillers.

Now when you reach for your next fat-free "health food," you might think, "Oh nuts," which is a good thing. You've got bigger fish to fry anyway.

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