

DIETARY FADS AND FANCIES

BY WINGATE M. JOHNSON, M.D.

A STORY has been told of the celebrated Dr. Janeway concerning the time that a younger colleague referred a patient to him for examination. After the great internist had looked the man over, offered his diagnosis, and outlined a treatment, the patient asked what he should eat. "Eat anything you want," replied Dr. Janeway, "except creamed oysters." Overwhelmed with admiration at this perspicacity, but too awed to ask any more questions, the patient later inquired of his own doctor how any man could be such a genius as to know that a perfect stranger could not eat creamed oysters. The lesser medical light was honest enough to admit his own ignorance, but volunteered to ask the eminent one at the next opportunity. Dr. Janeway's reply was, "I ate some myself the week before and they damn near killed me!"

This answer illustrates the basis for much of the advice given about diet. Doctors and dietitians, both amateur and professional, are apt to be influenced by their personal bias in telling their patients what to eat and what to

let alone — or, to make a poor pun, what to chew and what to eschew. It is fortunate for the human race that it can adapt itself to a wide variety of foods. Vegetarian faddists long ago demonstrated that meat can be dispensed with for a time, at least. More recently Stefansson and his companions lived for nine months in the Arctic regions on meat alone. When the suggestion was made that the intense cold and their strenuous exercise enabled them to utilize more meat than would have been possible under ordinary conditions, he and his companions lived for a year in New York on an exclusive meat diet, with no increase in their usual amount of exercise. Complete physical examinations, before and after the experiment, indicated that they were in rather better condition at the end of the year than at its beginning.

The chief lesson to be drawn from the vegetarians and the meat-eaters is the great adaptability of the human digestive apparatus. This quality serves us well from birth. It is doubtful that the population of our country would continue to increase if infants

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were not able to remain alive and in good health on a very wide variety of artificial feeding.

PROTEINS

In spite of Stefansson's experience, there has been considerable prejudice against meat — the chief source of protein — as an article of diet. The medical profession can justly be charged with part of the blame for this prejudice. Because an attack of gout may be precipitated by overindulgence in meat, it was long customary to restrict the intake of meat — especially red meats — for all patients with any form of arthritis. Many doctors forbid meat for patients with hypertension due to any cause. One medical institution in particular, which has branches scattered over the country, is permeated by a peculiar taboo against meats. The patients who go to this type of sanatorium are so thoroughly indoctrinated with the belief that vegetarianism is the straight and narrow dietetic path to physical as well as spiritual salvation that, with true missionary zeal, they try to convert all their friends.

The word protein, it may be recalled, means "primary; holding first place." While younger and more active individuals need relatively larger amounts of protein, even an older person, unless for some reason his doctor has advised a low-protein diet, should have at least one serving of meat or eggs a day and two or more glasses of milk. Other sources of protein are cheese, peas, soy beans and

peanuts. Small amounts of protein are to be found in whole wheat flour and whole grain cereals.

As people grow older they are apt to become more "finicky" about their diet, particularly if they lack sufficient teeth to provide satisfactory mastication. As the carbohydrate type of food is easily chewed, it is natural that it should come to occupy too large a place in the diet. Many older people really suffer from protein deficiency, and are greatly benefited by an adequate intake of this important dietary essential.

CARBOHYDRATES

Carbohydrates are found in foods that contain sugar and starch, such as bread, cake, candy or other sweets, cereals, and certain vegetables, such as corn, beets and potatoes.¹ Carbohydrates are readily utilized by the muscles as a kind of fuel, and so serve as a quick source of energy. The late Dr. Harvey W. Wiley once boasted that he had been responsible for a championship Harvard football team by advising the coach to have each player put a lump of sugar in his mouth just before going into action. (Evidently this advice has been forgotten or ignored within recent years.)

¹ Note to Southerners: Sweet potatoes not only have a higher carbohydrate content than do Irish potatoes, but they rank much higher in vitamin content. Both contain about the same amount of vitamin B, but sweet potatoes have a large amount of vitamin A and a respectable amount of C. Irish potatoes have less C and virtually no A.

Not many individuals past fifty, however, take enough exercise to entitle them to an extra ration of sugar — or of carbohydrate in any form. A reasonable amount of carbohydrate is needed in an adequate diet, but the average American, especially if he is past middle age, needs to be discouraged rather than encouraged in the use of this element of his diet.

A very powerful objection to the excessive use of carbohydrates is that it predisposes to diabetes. Most diabetics are recruited from the overweight class, and it is undeniable that sugars and starches in excess will put weight on almost anybody who does not take a great deal of exercise. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the continued ingestion of large amounts of carbohydrates may depress the cells in the pancreas which secrete insulin (the anti-diabetic hormone). Americans generally eat too much carbohydrate food, and, for reasons that have already been mentioned, older people are apt to err in this respect even more than the younger generation.

FATS

Fat in the diet serves at least three functions: (1) It delays the emptying of the stomach, and hence prolongs the feeling of satisfaction that follows a meal. It is for this reason that individuals with peptic ulcer are often advised to add cream to the milk which they drink for their between-meal feedings. In an individual whose stomach naturally empties slowly, this

property of fat might be undesirable.

(2) Fat stimulates the gall-bladder to empty the bile that is concentrated and stored for use in digestion. (3) Fats, especially those from animal sources, provide large amounts of vitamin A. (So do yellow vegetables and some of the green variety.)

Recently there has been considerable controversy over the relative merits of butter and the vegetable fat in margarine. It is a tribute to the political power of minority pressure groups that a huge intranational protective tariff has been levied on margarine, in spite of scientific evidence that the very simple procedure of adding vitamin A concentrate makes it the dietary equal of butter.

What was said of carbohydrates can also be said of fats: that most Americans, especially those past middle age, are apt to eat too much rather than too little of them. An excess of fat in the diet predisposes to obesity, with its attendant evils. There is also considerable evidence that overindulgence in fats may lead to an elevated blood pressure, and some competent observers believe that fats hasten arterial degeneration.

It is to be hoped that the reader will not conclude that fats and carbohydrates have no place in the diet of the older person and that proteins alone should be eaten. Both carbohydrates and fats, however, are available in so many forms that the average individual will almost certainly get his quota of them in any diet that is at all adequate. Furthermore, the fore-

going paragraphs were written much in the spirit of the older minister who, in giving advice to a very young one, said: "When it comes to the doctrine of eternal damnation, don't dilute it any; your congregation will do that for themselves."

VITAMINS

Renewed interest in diet has been brought about by the discovery of the vitamins. While their recognition is of prime importance in dietetics, it is unfortunate that they have been exploited beyond all reason by various commercial houses. Constantly, by means of the radio and advertisements in newspapers and magazines, we are reminded of the dangers of failing to get our daily quota of vitamins and are urged to safeguard ourselves and our families by purchasing So-and-So's Superconcentrated Vitamin Pills. Actually, Mother Nature is so lavish with the essentials of life that any normal person who eats a diet even fairly well balanced is in no danger of suffering from lack of vitamins. A thought worthy of emphasis has been well expressed by McCollum and Simmonds: that, with the exception of vitamin D, "the place to get vitamins is in the market, in the grocery store, from the milk man and from the garden, and not from the drug store."

The above paragraph is not intended to mean that vitamin concentrates have no place in medicine. There are some conditions in which vitamins are not absorbed properly from the digestive tract, or in which,

for one reason or another, the system needs an extra supply. In such cases supplementary vitamins are needed and will probably be prescribed by one's doctor. Some of the vitamins also have certain desirable side-effects, apart from their nutritional value. For example, the vasodilating property of nicotinic acid (which causes rather unpleasant flushing when taken on an empty stomach) has been found to give relief from the familiar "crick in the neck." This same vitamin is also effective in the condition known as "trench mouth," particularly in the acute form. Large doses of vitamin A have been found useful in the treatment of certain skin diseases, and especially in relieving the dry, itching condition of the skin often seen in old people.

As more is learned about the vitamins, it is probable that their use will be extended still further, and perhaps their abuse will be lessened. A point worth emphasizing, however, is that one should depend on his doctor to tell him when he needs extra vitamins, and which ones he should take.

FOOD FADS

All the publicity that has been given the vitamins, and the stress that has been laid upon the importance of a balanced diet have made the public diet-conscious to an unfortunate degree. With the specters of pellagra, rickets, scurvy, anorexia, diabetes, eczema, asthma, dandruff, and various other ailments threatening him if he doesn't consume his daily quota

of vitamins, it is no wonder that the average citizen falls easy prey to any of the army of quacks who pretend to point the way to health through eating. It has already been noted that the human body is remarkably able to burn almost any kind of fuel for a time at least, and therein is the explanation for the success of so many of the quacks who specialize in food fads. It must be admitted, also, that not all the faddists are outside the pale of the medical profession. A "diet list" is almost an essential in rearing children, and is helpful in treating many diseases of adult life; but the typed list is so impressive to the average layman that there is a temptation to use it unnecessarily, for its psychic effect alone.

Certain articles of food, wholesome in themselves, have been so unduly exalted by dietitians and doctors that their use has become a fetish. It is thought almost immoral nowadays to rear a child without his quota of spinach, and carrots are considered indispensable to health as well as to beauty. As a matter of fact, there are a number of other vegetables that may easily be substituted for both of these household gods.

DIETARY FANCIES

Many people are unwitting victims of dietary fancies. How often do we hear such expressions as "I can't eat fish," or "I can't drink milk," or "I never could learn to like spinach"—or cabbage or eggs or what not. Often the victim of such fancies fully ex-

pects to become nauseated by the article in question—and he is seldom disappointed. Stefansson, in *The Friendly Arctic*, said that until he was 27 years old he thought he could not eat fish. He admitted that he might have learned sooner "if it had not formed such an excellent topic of conversation."

It is true that there are rare cases of actual allergy to certain foods. Every pediatrician of experience occasionally has under his care a baby who breaks out with great wheals and perhaps vomits violently when given his first taste of egg; but most of these babies will acquire a tolerance for the offending food if it is given to them in very small amounts at first, and gradually increased. The great majority of food fancies, however, are purely imaginary, and can be overcome by the exercise of sufficient will power.

Many of these fancies amount to superstitions, such as the widespread belief that fish and milk eaten together are "poisonous." During my interne days, we were served fish every Friday for dinner. With most of the other young doctors, I washed my fish down with two or three glasses of milk—and can testify that they mixed perfectly.

The idea that certain "combinations" of foods are either helpful or harmful is exploited widely by certain quacks, who wax financially fat on human credulity. One man with a large following, for instance, condemns the age-old custom of eating

meats and starches in combination. Other food faddists insist on foods being eaten raw. This list of the varieties and subvarieties of quacks might be lengthened indefinitely, but it would be dreary reading.

DIETING

Perhaps the most dangerous dietary fad just now is limited almost entirely to the fair sex — that of dieting to get thin or to remain so. Like many other faults, it is the shadow of a virtue. Unquestionably, of the two extremes, leanness is preferable to obesity. I have often remarked that the practice of medicine would be made much easier if I could persuade my male patients to diet more and my female patients to diet less. If the ladies would only use discretion in the matter, and would not diet to the point of emaciation, they would deserve to be congratulated upon their will power — and their husbands and sweethearts might well follow their lead. It seems that no amount of persuasion, however, will make them listen to reason.

Some years ago the late Dr. S. Adolphus Knopf pointed out that the morbidity and mortality from tuberculosis were much greater among young women than among young men of corresponding ages. He attributed this fact chiefly to the "almost insane desire of so many of them to have a slender figure." Other penalties of excessive skinniness are kidneys made movable or "floating" by absorption of their bed of fat;

digestive disturbances caused by the sagging down of the stomach and intestines; anemia resulting from malnutrition; and excessively low blood pressure with its attendant weariness.

Much worse than self-induced skinniness, however, is the accumulation of a great excess of fat on the body — especially after middle age. Beyond serving as insulating and packing material, fat has no useful purpose in the body, but instead acts as a parasite. Its nutrition throws a tremendous extra burden on the heart, and the elimination of its waste products adds greatly to the work of the kidneys and bowels. Any insurance man will testify that the obese person is an undesirable risk. Even more important than the lessened life expectancy, however, is the sacrifice of some of the zest of living. To carry around the extra load of fat is really burdensome and fatiguing. The large meals usually consumed tax the digestion, depriving the brain of part of its quota of blood and thus lowering its efficiency.

More than a hundred years ago William Beaumont, a young army medical officer, took advantage of an external opening made by a gunshot wound in the stomach of a French-Canadian soldier, Alexis St. Martin, to study the physiology of digestion. Most of his observations, made patiently over a period of nearly ten years and recorded in a slim volume, are accepted today. One of the wisest of them was as follows:

There appears to be a sense of perfect intelligence conveyed from the stomach to

the encephalic center, which, in health, invariably dictates what quantity of aliment . . . is naturally required for the purposes of life. . . . It is not the sense of *satiety*, for this is beyond the point of *healthful* indulgence, and is nature's earliest indication of an *abuse* and *overburthen* of her powers to replenish the system. It occurs immediately previous to this, and may be known by the pleasurable sensation of *perfect satisfaction, ease and quiescence of body and mind*. It is when the stomach says *enough*, and is distinguished from satiety by the difference of the sensations — the former feeling *enough* — the latter, *too much*.

It is far easier to prevent the "middle-age spread" by learning to stop eating when the point of satisfaction is reached than to eradicate it after it has made its appearance. Even if one has already acquired a paunch and jowls, however, he can gradually regain some of his youthful figure by reducing his intake of food and by simple calisthenics. There are numerous tables of the caloric values of foods to be had for the asking. By using these tables and reducing his daily intake to between 1200 and 1800 calories, one can lose steadily and rapidly enough. Remember, however, to include in your diet the protective foods — milk, green vegetables, and some fruit. Milk may be skimmed, yet will still contain its quota of vitamins (except vitamin A) and calcium.

Except in the rare case of the in-

dividual who is very thin or very fat because of some glandular disturbance, most people have it within their own power to keep their weight within proper limits. Our flapper fanatics have proved, with determination worthy of a better cause, that it does not require an exceptionally high degree of intelligence to reduce and to stay reduced by attention to diet. The sensible path for the great majority of us is to keep in the middle of the road, avoiding either extreme. For men and women under twenty-five years of age, a few pounds extra are desirable. The further beyond that birthday one gets, the more a slender figure is to be desired; for the specter of tuberculosis begins to recede, and the diseases to be dreaded are diabetes, high blood pressure, hardened arteries, and damaged kidneys. Over-feeding is a cordial invitation to all this group.

The soundest advice which can be given concerning diet is to eat temperately of a balanced diet at regular intervals and under the most pleasant surroundings possible. The lapse of three centuries has not lessened the wisdom of Bacon's observation: "To be free-minded and cheerfully disposed at hours of meat and of sleep and of exercise, is one of the best precepts of long lasting."

THE DEEP ONE

A STORY

BY ED McNAMARA

WE LIVED in the apartment next to the Hogans and over ten thousand cups of tea I heard my parents wonder over Mr. Hogan.

"And why wouldn't Jamesy Hogan be the wildest boy in the neighborhood?" mother demanded. "And Eileen a scamp in her own right. Do they not have the quietest mouse of a father?"

My father shook his head. "Ah, but he's a deep one, that Hogan. Never a word out of him but he's up to something just the same, mark my words."

Mother sniffed. "He's up to nothing but making a fool of himself. He lets his family walk all over him. The man has no gumption."

Father wiped his hands on his suspenders before picking up his cup of tea. "What could any man do with a woman like Mrs. Hogan?" he asked.

"That flannel-mouth!" mother said. "Spends half her day leaning out the window and the other half gossiping all over the neighborhood and never a lick of house work done! Hogan should take the broom to her."

Father got up. "And she weighing

two hundred pounds and he one hundred and fifteen! Hogan's a fine man and a good friend."

Father took the checkerboard off the kitchen cabinet and stalked into the parlor. Mother shook her head.

"He and Hogan have been playing checkers for the past fifteen years," she said. "I've never heard that Hogan open his mouth to say more than 'thank you, I think I will have another beer.'"

"And he hasn't won a single game of checkers from father in all those years," I said wonderingly. "Why does father think so much of him?"

"That's why," mother said, staring into the leaves at the bottom of the cup to see what fortune they might hold.

But she was quite nice to Mr. Hogan when he came in a little later for his checker game with father. You couldn't help but be nice to him. He was a neat little man, with a crisp mustache and a healthy complexion. His hair was iron gray and his eyes were a soft gray, like the last winter sky before the coming of spring.

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