



April 9, 2011 – Dallas, TX

Refined Carbs

The past 20 years have seen a tremendous increase in obesity, and researchers have been looking for the reason why. Normally, I would just say it's obvious: we're eating more. But a recent study suggests that what we're eating is also important. Let's take a look at another report from the National Health and Nutrition Education Survey (NHANES).

The Study

Researchers compared nutritional data from the NHANES study from 1971-1975 with NHANES 2005-6. There were over 12,000 adults 20 to 74 years in the first study and almost 4,400 of a comparable age in the NHANES 2005-6. Dietary data from 24-hour food recalls were compared for carbohydrate, protein, and fat intake as well as total caloric intake. Dietary recalls are more accurate than food frequency questionnaires, so it makes the data more reliable, in my opinion.

BMI was used to categorize normal, overweight, and obese subjects; normal weight was a BMI 19 to 25, overweight was a BMI of 25 to 30, and obese was a BMI greater than 30.

The Results

Over those 30-plus years, obesity increased from 11.9% to 33.4% in men and from 16.6% to 36.5% in women. The distribution of calories from nutrients also changed in that time. Carbohydrate intake increased from 44.0% to 48.7% while fat intake decreased from 36.6% to 33.7% and protein decreased from 16.5% to 15.7%. These trends held regardless of weight category. Normal, overweight, and obese subjects all had the same dietary pattern.

Total caloric intake increased in all three BMI groups, even the normal-weight group. The average increase for men was about 250 calories per day, and about 300 calories per day for women. What was interesting was that in both NHANE surveys, women reported lower caloric intake in the overweight and obese categories than the normal-weight category. That supports the observation that overweight women under-report their weight. Men under-report their height, but in this case, all subjects were measured so the men couldn't say they were taller than they were.

A Closer Look

The study raises an important question: was the increase in carbohydrate intake responsible for the increase in body weight? Remember, caloric intake increased in each BMI category, so everyone was eating more. But the increase in total caloric intake had to be the result of increased carbohydrate intake because fat and protein decreased. So was it the calories or the fact that they were carbohydrate calories?

I think it comes down to the type of carbohydrate calories even though that wasn't directly reported in the study. Since the 1970s, the use of soda and processed snack foods has increased. At the same time, with the emphasis on the negative effects of fat on cholesterol and heart disease, fat intake decreased. Part of that decrease was the result of less meat intake, the primary source of protein for most Americans. We didn't respond by eating more vegetables, fruits, and whole grains as the source of carbohydrates; we ate more refined carbohydrates and drank more sugary drinks. We bungled that one—fat is bad? Well, then give me more sugar! Yikes.

The Bottom Line

If we're going to solve the obesity issue in North America, we're going to have to make better choices. What this study implies is that not all carbohydrates are created equal. Highly refined carbohydrates contain more sugars and less fiber. They contribute to the obesity issue because they're easier to digest and can make us hungry again sooner. If there were ever a reason to eat more vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, this is it.

Which raises an issue: we all recognize fruits and vegetables, but what are the whole grains we should be eating? I'll cover that in detail next Saturday.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

Reference: Am J Clin Nutr 2011;93:836-43

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