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The history of dieting

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fact sheet

Dieting has probably been around for thousands of years, although not in any structured way like we see all around us today. It wasn't very common until the 1800s however, simply because people who were overweight were not very common. Apart from rich merchants, bankers and the various ranks of royal personages, these types were often fat in body and wallet. The hierarchies of organised religions apparently thought that their own gluttony would assist the poor and needy in some mysterious and never explained way, while most people had a regular struggle to get enough food for their families' health.

So being fat was not a problem encountered by most, but maybe they would have wished it was, as an outward sign of prosperity and plenty.

Those diets that did exist, whenever a prince or bishop decided that not being able to move around freely was a problem, involved no more than a slight reduction in quantity of the same food. Perhaps deciding to have only three fowl, one barrel of ale or mulled wine, and one roast hog per day instead of overdoing it!

As time progressed, so did a relative redistribution of wealth. This inevitably led to those lower down the financial scales, but on their way up, having too much of what was hitherto unavailable to them. They probably shouldn't be directly blamed for this either, as excess food and drink can be a pleasure indeed, especially when newly found.

Another problem is that the human body is particularly well suited to putting on the pounds. Fatty and sugary foods are digested enthusiastically and the excess energy given is stored by the body for a time when such riches may not be an option. This is after all, a sensible measure to take by a bodily system that has evolved over millions of years, during which time a truly enormous number of people must have starved to death.

As a defensive measure against starvation, our bodies know that getting fat is a good thing, and biologically, the modern man and woman is no different from our pre-history and ancient history ancestors. A couple of centuries of freely accessible food for all are nothing compared to the survival struggle it has endured for so long. The human body has not had enough time to adjust to modern realities (realities in developed countries, at least) and that may turn out to be a good thing if one of

those lurking asteroids hits us sometime! Let us not be arrogantly presumptuous that all will be well forever in the times ahead, our bodies certainly are not and hence the continuing likening for the flab.

All very well, but civilization destroyed by asteroids is only a faintly possible threat. Rising cholesterol, blood pressure, cancers, heart disease and other not too delightful diseases and conditions associated with obesity are here today, killing us off with all too often frequency.

Dr. Sawdust and his crackers

But strangely enough it wasn't entirely the health factors of being overweight that first got the modern diet off the starting blocks, as well as health concerns, it was the war against sin! Yea, the immorality of excess from the glutton will cause a more sinful world. And we all know what the punishment of sin is.

A world entirely full of thin sticks of people would doubtlessly be just as sinful, but not to the American Presbyterian minister Sylvester Graham, who after being ordained in 1826, began to preach in the 1830's that the ills of health; physical, moral, and spiritual, could all be remedied by a basic vegetarian diet.

He also encouraged such behavior as; sleeping on hard and unyielding mattresses, the opening of bedroom windows (whatever the weather), regular cold showers, brisk hearty exercise, clothing to include only loose garments, pure water (fair enough), and of course chastity!

So as you can imagine, this luminary of the temperance movement in the city of Philadelphia was not entirely popular in some quarters, and he was referred to as 'Dr. Sawdust' by his detractors. Though he did attract a number a followers who obediently did as they were told and became known as 'the Grahamites'. They, after being converted to the ways of the diet, further spread his word, and thousands would attend his lectures. Those not able to could read of his theories in the Graham Journal of Health and Longevity.

The originator of Graham flour and the flat bread known as Graham crackers, he stated that the vitality, strength and all-round health of the orangutan proved that vegetarianism was the way forward, and tirelessly campaigned against all alcohol and also coffee, tea and tobacco as stimulants.

Because of his regaling against the bakers of the day, who used refined flour where the wheat had been stripped of most of its nutritional goodness to facilitate a faster baked loaf, he sometimes needed bodyguards at his meetings. Milk producers also suffered his wrath, who fed their cows on swill leftover from the distilleries, and had to add the likes of chalk and molasses to their sold milk, to neutralise the taste of the alcoholic content and make it presentable to the public.

Now to England and the Banting Plan

In 1850s England, a man called William Banting was in a seriously obese state of affairs, and he had had enough of it. This unfortunate fellow was so fat that he supposedly could not tie his own shoes, and it is said that he had to go downstairs backwards. Despairing at the inability of the doctors to help him, their advice on exercise, steam baths, temporary starvations and chemical purges had all come to naught, he at last found something that worked.

One medical practitioner, a Doctor Harvey, had suggested that he might find the answer by not eating any more than a minimum of sugars and starches. Low carbohydrate diets had been born.

William Banting followed this advice, and lost fifty pounds in a year. So delighted at his success, he wrote a book, which was the world's first diet book, to tell of his experience, the splendidly titled: *Letter on Corpulence Addressed to the Public*, that was published in 1862.

His obesity had been cured but the British Medical Association immediately attacked this approach, and because Banting was not a scientist, claimed that it had no scientific value and would not work for others. The public however were impressed, and people all over the English speaking world read of his plan and lost weight themselves, not caring about the doubters. So popular did it prove to be, that it was translated into other languages and thus spread even wider.

The dieting torch is passed on to 'The Great Masticator'

One way of success had been found, but many approaches can work. Another was to involve the mechanism of chewing, or masticating, as it is properly known. Around the end of the nineteenth century; William Ewart Gladstone, the four times British Prime Minister, had apparently advised that a person should always masticate thirty two times before swallowing (why thirty two? - the same number as the total of teeth in the mouth). This would inevitably lead to a lessening of the appetite and subsequent weight loss for better health.

Powerful world leaders usually have their opinions listened to with respect, but one American considered this with more than a passing interest. He was to come to believe that it was the perfect answer to the fat problem. This man was Horace Fletcher, who would become better known to the citizenry in the United States by the nicknames of 'The Chew-Chew Man' and 'The Great Masticator.'

Horace Fletcher might have been himself inspired by Gladstone, but he was to take this enthusiasm for chewing to heights surely undreamt of, even by that worthy. The chewing should continue, he proclaimed, until the food becomes a liquid in the mouth. And any food that does not (like fibre) should therefore not be chewed in the first place.

Leaving fibre out of a diet leads to constipation, as those caught up in the frenzy of mastication were to painfully discover, but Fletcher persisted that this was right and a small price to pay, and lost over sixty pounds in weight by this approach.

In an unlikely parallel with Rev. Sylvester Graham, that earlier notable of American dieting, the Great Masticator held that all meat should be avoided, as well as coffee, tea and alcohol. He also wrote in his book, *The A-Z of our own Nutrition*, that no-one should eat until they were hungry, and that they should try to be happy at mealtimes. Most important though, they should chew until 'the food swallowed itself'.

A side note here is that a Dr John Kellogg thought that the advice from Fletcher to avoid fibre was so wrong that he founded his famous cereal company to make sure Americans were getting plenty of fibre in their diets.

Calories arrive on the scene

The theory of the calorific value of foodstuffs, which is how much thermal energy they give off when burned, was started by a chemist called Wilbur Atwater. But it was around two decades later, in 1918 before the calorie left the world of academia and hit the mainstream.

Lulu Hunt Peters, a Californian doctor, introduced the concept of counting calories in a diet to aid weight loss in her bestseller book, *Diet and Health with a Key to the Calories*. This scientific way of looking at things was a big hit with the public, and despite her honest message that dieting could be a tough road to follow at times, with an emphasis on self-discipline and willpower to win the war against fat, her work is influential to this day.

She also showed that a lot of money could be made by anyone coming up with new ideas to help overweight people. More of whom were now around in society than ever before, and combined with the phenomenon of movie theaters and subsequent beginnings of the hero worship of the stars of the silver screen, almost all of whom were good looking of course, the public's obsession with fat was off to a running start. This was noted by both genuine writers on the subject of dieting advice, and complete cranks.

What combination to use?

Some came up with variations of the idea (and still do) that how much food is eaten is almost an irrelevance; the only thing that matters is what combinations of foods are consumed at the same time.

The first of these was William H. Hay, who recommended that proteins, starches and sugars should be eaten completely separately to avoid the putting on of excess fat. He also advised that having an enema each and every day was a key to proper health.

Others took this up and altered it slightly, claiming that some food could change the fatty properties of other foods, if digested together. This was apparently the miracle cure for obesity. But despite the validity of this theory never being even part proven by proper research, it has been still loudly proclaimed by many that their particular method of matching foodstuffs will guarantee that fat is burned quicker, or otherwise dispensed with.

Time passes

And people are still eating more, weighing more, and dieting more.

There have been far too many diets set upon the public to discuss in one article, but let's have a look at a timeline and include a few notable points in dieting history.

1930s — The Hollywood Diet (soon to be better known as the Grapefruit Diet) is introduced. Seaweeds, such as kelp and bladderwrack, are promoted as the food of choice to end weight problems.

Diet 'guru', Victor Lindlahr, regularly broadcasts on the nations' radios to spread news of 'reverse calorie foods'. This is a catabolic system of weight loss he has discovered where some foods use up more calories to be digested, than they give out to the body; like celery and apples.

1940s and 1950s — Ideal weight charts are invented by matching a weight with gender, height and

frame.

Diet pills are introduced that are based on Amphetamine derivatives. It is soon realised that they are dangerous.

1960s — A woman named Jean Nidetch and friends hold a meeting in her apartment to share support and advice on dieting. It is the beginning of Weight Watchers.

Dr. Atkins releases his plan for weight loss. The high-protein, high-fat and low-carbohydrate diet causes a storm of controversy that still rages today as multiple health fears are voiced by critics.

1970s — The FDA (US Food and Drug Administration) calls for a ban on saccharin in the United States. Because of voter fury, the US Congress does not heed this advice.

The Pritikin Diet Program with low-fat and high-fibre is introduced for those with heart complaints, but quickly is taken up by others for weight loss.

The eating disorder anorexia nervosa is described for the first time by psychiatrists as many continual dieters are becoming underweight.

A new diet drug called fenfluramine is introduced which makes the brain think the stomach is full.

Dr. Robert Linn invents a protein drink called Prolinn, which is made up of slaughterhouse by-products like crushed horns and hooves and hides, which are treated with artificial flavourings and enzymes. He urges for all looking to lose weight, to completely omit food and break the fast only by the use of his product in The Last Chance Diet. Somewhere around three million weight worriers give it a go.

The book entitled, *Fit for Life* is written by Harvey and Marilyn Diamond. In it are claims that the human body has changing physiological needs for certain foodstuffs depending on the time of the day.

1980s — The Beverly Hills Diet becomes the latest dieting craze. It holds that only fruit should be eaten for the first ten days of the plan.

An anti-diabetes system called The Glycaemic Index is developed by Dr David Jenkins and a team of scientists at the University of Toronto. To help simplify the problems suffered by diabetics, this index charts how quickly a range of diverse foodstuffs affects blood sugar levels. It is embraced by most diabetes organisations around the world, to help them better assess the sugary and starchy carbohydrates. However, this research is also often misappropriated by authors of fad diets to back up their weight loss claims.

TV personality Oprah Winfrey loses almost 70 pounds on a liquid diet.

Health writer Susan Powter advises her female readers to diet less and exercise more.

1990s — The FDA demands that food labelling should include more detailed information about calories and fat content to assist dieting consumers, and for better general public health.

A shocking report indicates that 40 per cent of nine- and ten-year-old children in the United States are dieting for weight-loss reasons.

The diet pills containing fenfluramine and the related dexfenfluramine are withdrawn by their manufacturers as the FDA reports on them being a cause of heart valve disease.

2000s — some researchers claim that for the first time in recorded human history, the number of underfed people in the world has been equalled by those overweight.

And on and on we go, most still worrying about our weight as the wealth of society increases; it seems there will always be self-made problems for humanity to deal with. Bountiful advances on some fields are inevitably the harbingers of coming trouble elsewhere.

As a last word for now on this topic, that well-loved bear Winnie the Pooh, once asked how long it took to get thin. The answer, it appears, is still not fully available.

About the author

Matt Jacks is a successful freelance copywriter who provides valuable tips and advice for consumers on a range of topics including weight loss. His numerous articles offer moneysaving tips and valuable insight on typically confusing topics.

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