

Ask Leyla: A closer look at the starch-based McDougall diet



Q: Can you tell me what you think about the starch based diet that Dr. McDougall recommends?

A: What if I told you that the healthiest diet includes pizza, pasta, pancakes... and sugar? You would either jump up and down with glee or scratch your head in confusion, yes?

Well, this is the claim of one Dr. John McDougall, author of many bestselling books and founder of the McDougall Program. His premise is that humans are starch-eaters, “starchivores” or “starchitarians”, if you will, and that sugar doesn’t make us fat. (You can read the full interview here in Blue Zones.)

When asked how likely it is that an herbivore will get diabetes, cancer or heart disease over a carnivore, Dr. McDougall states that if you follow his diet the likelihood is zero, compared to meat-eaters. To be clear, the McDougall Program includes starches like corn, rice, potatoes, peas, lentils, beans and sweet potatoes as the core of the diet, then adding vegetables and fruits (no dairy). He claims that meat is “not the ideal food for people.”

While I like that the core starches don’t contain any wheat or gluten, and that the diet itself eliminates dairy (thereby removing the most common suspects in chronic disease—especially autoimmunity), there is no mention of how all those starches may impact anyone with blood sugar issues. All that starch will be deleterious to those with carbohydrate intolerance (read: hypoglycemia and type 2 diabetes).

When the interviewer points out that those living in the Blue Zones also eat some meat, Dr. McDougall likens it to smoking cigarettes. He asserts that animal foods aren’t necessary for micronutrients and protein, adding “You can get B12 from other processes.” Sure, you can take a supplement. That’s fine. He adds that “Animal products are toxic in terms of fat content and cholesterol and the protein is very damaging to the system.” And he goes on to say that “they are full of environmental contaminants.”

Dr. McDougall is clearly still buying into the low-fat dogma which at this point is considered old science, because we know that any claims that saturated animal fats are dangerous have been recently debunked. Moreover, he makes no distinction between factory farmed animals administered antibiotics and hormones, and grass-fed beef and pasture-raised poultry.

When asked the best way to slim down and get healthy, Dr. McDougall says to “stop eating poisonous foods, which are animal products and oils.” I agree with him about the oils if he means vegetable oils like corn, cottonseed, soybean and of course,

factory-made trans fats. But then he references historical pictures—35 years ago—from various town squares in places like China, Japan, Vietnam and Thailand, citing that “You didn’t see a single fat person”. He says the reason for that is their diets were mostly comprised of starches like rice.

Well, we know that obesity rates have gone up globally... so I can’t help but wonder what more recent pictures would reveal? However, I will concede that the adoption of more Westernized diets, mostly in the form of fast food in those regions, have contributed greatly to the obesity epidemic.

When asked why Dr. McDougall does not put sugar in the same category as other poisonous foods, he states that animal products are the primary toxins. But when it comes to sugar and salt, people desire them. He states, “The reason we love them is because we need them for good health.”

He recommends using a little salt and a bit of “sugar on the surface of food so you want to eat it.” Dr. McDougall goes on to say that while a teaspoon of brown sugar in a bowl of oatmeal may cause cavities and raise triglycerides, it’s not likely to increase risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes.

Hmmm... rotten teeth, fatty liver and increased risk of atherosclerosis? I think I’ll pass.

And his argument against low-carb diets? “These diets (like the original Atkins diet, Wheat Belly and Grain Brain) work by putting you into ketosis. What they really do is make you sick.”

Noteworthy proponents of the McDougall Program are the well-known vegans, T. Colin Campbell, PhD and Michael Greger, MD.

Is the McDougall Program the healthiest diet on the planet? I’ll let you decide.

To your health!

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