Dr. Marlene's
NATURAL HEALTH CONNECTIONS

VOLUME 9 | ISSUE 4:3

A PUBLICATION OF PRIMAL HEALTH

Food Isn't as Simple as It Looks — Part Three

The Fat Myth: Whole-Fat Foods Were Never the Real Problem

How Fat Became the Villain

If you've been paying attention to nutrition advice for more than a couple of decades, you probably remember the period when fat was treated as the main dietary problem.

For years the message seemed very clear: eat less fat.

Grocery stores were (and in many cases, still are) filled with low-fat yogurt, fat-free salad dressings, reduced-fat cheeses, and skim milk. Entire sections of the supermarket appeared almost overnight, filled with products designed to remove as much fat as possible. Does anyone remember the Snackwell fat-free cookies?

The reasoning sounded simple enough. Fat contains more calories per gram than carbohydrates or protein (9 calories per gram, vs. 4 calories per gram for carbs, and 4 for protein. 7 calories per gram of alcohol) , so removing fat from food was assumed to help people reduce calorie intake and maintain a healthy weight.

But nutrition rarely works that simply. Because that's not what happened.

Over time, instead of improving metabolic health, many people found themselves feeling hungrier, eating more frequently, and struggling with energy swings during the day.

Researchers also began noticing another pattern. During the same decades that low-fat foods became widely promoted, rates of obesity and blood sugar problems rose dramatically.

That doesn't mean fat suddenly became the solution to every health problem. But it does suggest the story about fat was more complicated than many people were originally told.

And once you understand what fat actually does during digestion, the picture starts to make much more sense.

What Fat Actually Does in Digestion

One of the most important roles fat plays in food is something many people rarely hear about. Fat slows digestion.

When a meal contains natural fats, the stomach releases its contents into the small intestine more gradually. This slower process allows nutrients to be absorbed over time instead of all at once.

As a result, blood sugar tends to rise more steadily and energy is released at a slower, more manageable pace. The digestive system also responds to fat in another important way. When fats are present in a meal, the body releases hormonal signals that communicate with the brain and help create the feeling of fullness and satiety.

In simple terms, fat helps the body recognize that it has been fed.

When meals contain some natural fat, hunger tends to stay away longer. Energy feels steadier, and the urge to snack between meals often decreases.

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Natural Health Connections is a monthly publication of Primal Health LP.

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This is one reason meals built from whole foods tend to feel more satisfying.

What Happens When Fat Is Removed

Now here's where things become interesting.

When fat is removed from a food, a couple of things happen. One is that the digestive experience changes, and the other is that food starts to taste… not like real food. In other words, not great.

Let's start with digestion.

Without fat slowing things down, carbohydrates move through the digestive system more quickly. That means glucose can enter the bloodstream faster, which often produces the same rapid blood sugar rise we discussed earlier in this series.

The body then releases insulin to bring those levels back down.

When that cycle repeats frequently — rapid rise followed by rapid drop — many people begin experiencing stronger hunger signals, fluctuating energy, and cravings for more food.

So removing fat from food doesn't simply reduce calories. It changes how the entire meal behaves in the body.

Two foods that appear very similar can produce very different metabolic responses depending on whether natural fat is present.

Now, add in that the food doesn't have the same "mouth feel" (seriously, that's the term) or taste as the full-fat version. For example, there's a very distinct difference between how skim milk tastes (like water, right?) vs.

whole milk or half-and-half. Because it doesn't taste as good, manufacturers have to add a lot more artificial flavoring and sugar to make those unpalatable foods taste better. Take a look at a low-fat yogurt label and see how many carbs and sugar it has.

OK, back to milk.

A Simple Example

Milk provides a useful example of how this works.

Whole milk naturally contains several components working together: lactose, which is the natural milk sugar (half of that molecule is glucose), proteins, minerals, and fat.

In this natural combination, the fat helps regulate how quickly the lactose is broken down and absorbed.

When fat is removed to produce skim or low-fat milk, that balance changes. What remains is mostly lactose and protein with very little fat to slow digestion. Literally, it becomes a form of sugar water.

Without that natural buffering effect, the sugar in milk enters the bloodstream a bit like dessert.

Some research has even observed that children who regularly drink low-fat milk may have higher rates of weight gain compared with children drinking whole milk. Which makes sense if you recognize that skim milk is very much like sugar water.

Nutrition research is complex and many factors influence health, but findings like these illustrate how removing fat can change the metabolic behavior of a food.

Once you begin looking at foods through this lens, many of the changes that occurred during the low-fat era start to make more sense.

What Happened to the Missing Fat

You probably didn't think about this, but that fat is still valuable. And food manufacturing companies don't want to waste something that valuable. No, instead you turn it into something else that can be sold.

In this case, the majority of fat that is removed in the manufacturing of low-fat foods is ironically turned into ice cream. Funny, right?

Putting This Into Practice: Looking at Fat a Little Differently

Understanding how fat influences digestion can change the way we evaluate many foods. For years, grocery shopping often meant choosing the lowest-fat version of everything, but that approach doesn't always reflect how food actually behaves in the body.

Whole foods such as eggs, nuts, fish, and traditional dairy naturally contain fats along with other nutrients. In these foods, fat is part of the structure, which helps slow digestion and allows energy to be released more steadily.

When fat is removed, foods often need additional ingredients to recreate flavor and texture. These rebuilt foods may look similar, but once digestion begins, they can behave quite differently.

Try This Today: Notice How Meals Affect Your Hunger

Notice What Actually Keeps You Full

Over the next few days, try paying attention to how different meals affect your hunger and energy levels.

For example, compare a meal that includes natural fats — perhaps eggs with vegetables, full-fat yogurt with nuts, or a salad with olive oil — with a meal built mostly from refined carbohydrates such as sweetened cereals, crackers, or low-fat snack foods.

Notice how long you stay satisfied after eating and how steady your energy feels during the hours that follow. Do you feel comfortable and steady, or do you find yourself looking for something else not long after?

Many people discover that meals containing natural fats tend to keep them full longer, while meals built mostly from refined carbohydrates often lead to hunger returning much sooner. It's not always dramatic, but once you start paying attention, the pattern tends to show up fairly consistently.

Notice What Happens After Meals

If you want to take it one step further, notice what happens a few hours after those meals.

Do you feel like you could easily go to your next meal, or do you feel like you need something in between? Does your energy feel steady, or do you notice a dip that makes you want something quick and easy?

You don't need to track anything or change everything at once. Just start observing. These small patterns often tell you quite a bit about how your body is responding to different types of food.

What's Next?

Part Four of Food Isn't as Simple as It Looks

Next week, we'll wrap up this series by looking at another area of nutrition advice that often creates confusion: recommendations that lack clear limits.

We'll explore why guidance around alcohol and protein can sometimes feel vague, how the body processes these substances, and why the quality of foods — including the difference between conventional and grass-fed meat — can matter more than most guidelines suggest.

About Dr. Marlene

Dr. Marlene Merritt's passion for natural medicine is fueled by her drive to help others, and her own experience of overcoming a debilitating heart condition, diagnosed at the age of 20. A competitive cross-country cyclist at the time, she suddenly began experiencing severe chest pains. Forced to quit the sport, she suffered from extreme fatigue and constant pain for another 15 years, despite doing everything that conventional, Western medical doctors told her to do.

And then, the tide turned. A physician trained in naturopathic healing recommended a whole-food vitamin E supplement. A week after starting the supplement regimen, her energy began to return, and the pain began to disappear.

Dr. Marlene is a Doctor of Oriental Medicine, has a Master's in Nutrition, and is an Applied Clinical Nutritionist. She is Board Certified in Bariatric Counseling, and certified in the Bredesen MEND Protocol,™ a groundbreaking method of reversing Alzheimer's disease. She sees patients at the Merritt Wellness Centers in Austin, Texas, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, trains health practitioners nationwide, and is the author of Smart Blood Sugar and The Blood Pressure Solution.

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Q&A

Q: **Is insulin resistance reversible?— Mark T.**

A: In many cases, yes. Insulin resistance is not a fixed condition — it's a response to prolonged exposure to elevated insulin. When insulin levels stay high for long periods, cells begin to resist its signal. The pancreas compensates by producing even more insulin, and eventually blood sugar may start to rise.

This process usually develops gradually, often driven by frequent intake of refined carbohydrates, constant snacking, poor sleep, or chronic stress. Over time, the body is simply working harder to maintain balance, even if lab values still appear "normal."

The key is lowering the demand for insulin. That usually means reducing refined carbohydrates and starches, spacing meals appropriately, and engaging muscles regularly through resistance or interval training. Muscle tissue plays a major role here — it acts like a sponge for glucose, helping pull sugar out of the bloodstream and reducing the need for excess insulin.

As insulin levels begin to fall, cells often become more responsive again. Acting early makes a significant difference, and many people see meaningful improvement once the underlying drivers are addressed. Consistency tends to matter more than perfection when it comes to restoring insulin sensitivity, and even small changes can lead to noticeable improvements.

Q: **Why do I still gain weight while eating low carb? — Angie P.**

A: Weight changes on a low carb approach can happen for several reasons, and it doesn't always mean something is wrong. As you lose weight, your calorie needs decrease slightly, and metabolism may slow — especially if muscle mass isn't being maintained.

Sometimes the cause is subtle. Hidden carbohydrates can creep back in through sauces, snacks, "low carb" products, or larger portions of foods like fruit or nuts. These small increases can raise insulin more than expected and slow fat loss.

Protein intake can also play a role. While protein is important, eating too much can raise blood sugar because some amino acids are converted into glucose. That rise can increase insulin and make it harder for the body to access stored fat over time.

Stress and poor sleep are often overlooked drivers. Elevated cortisol can increase insulin levels and make fat loss more difficult, even if your diet hasn't changed much. Over time, this can make progress feel stalled or reversed.

Frequent snacking — even on low carb foods — can also keep insulin elevated and limit fat burning.

Muscle mass matters as well. Strength training helps preserve and build muscle, which keeps metabolism more active and improves insulin sensitivity.

When progress slows or reverses, it helps to review protein intake, hidden carbs, stress, sleep, meal timing, and muscle-building activity. Often, small adjustments are enough to get things moving again.

Q: **Why do I wake up at 3 a.m. and can't fall back asleep? — Ray R.**

A: Early morning awakenings can often be related to stress hormones. If cortisol rises too early, it can trigger alertness before the body is ready to wake. This may happen more frequently during periods of stress, when the body is on higher alert even during the night.

Blood sugar swings can also play a role. If blood sugar drops too low overnight, the body may release cortisol to bring it back up, which can wake you suddenly and make it difficult to fall back asleep. This is especially common if dinner was light, very early, or high in refined carbohydrates.

Evening habits matter here. Late meals, especially those high in carbohydrates, or eating too close to bedtime can contribute to overnight fluctuations.

Improving evening meal timing, reducing late-night screen exposure, and supporting stress management often helps restore more consistent sleep patterns and improves sleep continuity over time.

Do you have a question for Dr. Marlene?

Send your health-related questions to drmarlene@naturalhealthconnections.com. Please include your first name and the initial of your last name. Although she cannot answer each question directly, Dr. Marlene will select a few in each newsletter and will address other questions and concerns in articles in future issues. Answers are intended for educational purposes only and should not be viewed as medical advice. If you need help with your subscription or have questions about Primal Health supplements, email support@primalhealthlp.com or call 877-300-7849.