Is the Paleo diet healthy? A dietetic intern explores the trendy diet.

By Shavon Alexander

It’s the time of the year when people are shopping for new diets and looking for ways to stick to their new year’s resolution. Some may look to the Paleo diet since it has become very popular. The Paleo diet is based on eating the foods from the Paleolithic era before agriculture began. It is based loosely on the belief that if the cavemen didn’t eat it, we shouldn’t either. The diet claims are effortless weight loss, increased energy and reduced inflammation.

There is a long list of foods that are not permitted on the Paleo diet. All grains, including whole grains and rice, legumes, most dairy, white potatoes, added sugar and artificial sweeteners, processed meats and all other forms of processed foods. Oils that are considered unsafe because they are high in omega-6 fats like canola oil and vegetable oil are not permitted. But while the diet is restrictive it allows freedom in unexpected areas. For instance there is no calorie counting or portion restrictions in Paleo unlike many popular diets. You are to simply eat until you are satisfied. In addition, you are free to eat foods that are typically forbidden such as butter, nuts, heavy cream and fatty meats.

The goal of the eating plan is to reduce insulin spikes by eliminating high glycemic carbs and to instead eat mostly healthy fats, protein and vegetables. Fruit is allowed in moderation with the preference of low sugar fruits such as berries. Insulin is a hormone secreted by the pancreas that signals cells to take in glucose. Depending on the person’s energy needs at the time this taking in of blood glucose can turn it into fat. So every time insulin gets secreted, there is an opportunity for potential fat storage.

While the importance of preventing insulin spikes is understandable, there are some important questions to ask before embarking on this diet. Is it healthy to eliminate major food groups like grains and legumes that have proven nutritional benefits? Grains contain B vitamins important for energy production. Legumes such as beans and peas are a good source of folate which is important for tissue growth and repair. And dairy is one of the best sources of calcium, important for bone and teeth health.

Another part of the Paleo diet that may be problematic is the generous amount of red meat that one can eat. Just in 2015, a report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a research division of the World Health Organization, said that red meat is probably carcinogenic. Albeit the report didn’t differentiate between conventional and organic meat.

But there are two sides to every story. A meta-analysis from Manheimer et al. (2015) suggested that Paleolithic nutrition as compared to conventional dietary guidelines, can produce higher HDL cholesterol (this is good), lower triglycerides, blood pressure and fasting blood glucose in as little as 2 weeks. In another study of 9 healthy non-obese men and women, Frassetto et al. (2009) compared lipids, fasting insulin and glucose and resting blood pressure before and after participants consumed a Paleolithic diet for 10 days. With the exception of HDL and fasting glucose, subjects experienced significant improvements in LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, insulin sensitivity and blood pressure.
While there is evidence both for and against this diet, there are some personal considerations to first think about. With the reliance on organics someone looking to go Paleo should consider the cost. While the cost of organics have come down over the last couple years, pound for pound they are more expensive than conventional fare. Another factor to consider is the time commitment to eating Paleo. Paleo-style eating will require extra time to find and purchase the grass-fed meats and organic produce. Extra time will also be needed for meal preparation - since the diet is so restrictive it may be hard to find Paleo approved meals on the go.

The Paleo diet may be a trendy diet but since it is relatively new to us modern day *Homo sapiens* there isn’t enough evidence to prove that it is healthy for a long term basis. Someone about to adopt this diet should probably try it for a short time first to see how it fits. Blood work should be monitored to make sure lipids are within normal limits, and their energy levels and overall health should also be watched.

**References**

