

Explore

HEALTH

Recipes, not prescriptions: Eat for health

Nutrition emphasized as answer to illness

BY BLAIR ANTHONY ROBERTSON
brobertson@sacbee.com

Watch television for any length of time and you're sure to see countless commercials for prescription drugs. And whose ears don't perk up when those spots end with a laundry list of potential side effects — everything from diarrhea to death? Flulike symptoms? Depression? Suicidal tendencies? Those, too.

But what if there were alternatives to many of the prescription medications and over-the-counter drugs that treat what ails you?

In many cases, there are. Bypass the pharmacy and head straight to the grocery store. And when you get there, steer clear of packaged foods with a long list of ingredients, most of which sound nothing like food.

Fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains and clean cooking without lots of added oils and salt can lower blood pressure and

“THE STANDARD AMERICAN DIET (SAD) IS KILLING US, INSTEAD OF PROVIDING US WITH OUR BASIC NEEDS FOR GOOD HEALTH. IT HAS PRODUCED A NATION WHERE DISEASE AND CHRONIC ILLNESS ARE CONSIDERED TO BE INEVITABLE AND JUST ANOTHER NATURAL CONSEQUENCE OF AGING. ...

Joel Fuhrman
author and physician

cholesterol, prevent or even reverse heart disease, combat diabetes, curb cancer risks, reduce inflammation and, in doing all that, trim your waistline and give you more energy.

If that sounds too good to be true, it might be because for generations now doctors have been more likely to write a prescription than sit you down for a primer on how to eat your way to optimal health.

That's changing. Medical schools are placing more emphasis on nutrition education. More doctors are

SEE FOOD, 7C

MARGARET SPENGLER mspengler@sacbee.com

FROM PAGE 6C

FOOD

urging patients to revamp their eating habits. And numerous resources such as forksoverknives.com and nutritionfacts.org online have emerged in recent years to lay out the facts about the dire health risks of a poor diet and offer ample recipes to make this food-based cure seem palatable, if not delicious.

If you're already eating a whole foods, plant-based diet that limits or skips fatty meats, dairy, sugary treats and processed foods, you're in the minority. The so-called Standard American Diet – aptly shortened to SAD – is laden with all kinds of bad and very little that's good.

In his book “The End of Dieting,” author and physician Joel Fuhrman makes a strong case for overhauling your dietary habits and, in doing so, leaving the prescription drugs behind.

“The standard American diet is killing us,” Fuhrman writes. “Instead of providing us with our basic needs for good health, it has produced a nation where disease and chronic illness are considered to be inevitable and just another natural consequence of aging. ... By the time most Americans reach the age of fifty, they are already hooked on prescription drugs, and almost half of Americans still die of heart attacks and strokes.

“You don't have to be one of them. Twenty-eight

million Americans suffer from the crippling pain of osteoarthritis. You don't have to be one of them. Thirty-five million Americans suffer from chronic headaches. You don't have to be one of them. You simply don't have to be sick.”

In a telephone interview, Fuhrman said the most effective way to lower your blood pressure, for instance, “is diet, not drugs.”

“When you use medication to lower your blood pressure, you didn't take the weight off the person and you didn't make the blood vessel healthier,” Fuhrman said.

The doctor says studies show 90 percent of type 2 diabetes cases can be reversed without medication.

The fix?

“Take a big index card and put it on the refrigerator – ‘Salad is the main dish.’ Have a big salad once a day with a seed-based dressing,” he said. “Make a big pot of vegetable bean soup or chili and have it all week long as one of the main dishes. Making beans your primary source of protein will extend your lifespan and is effective for reversing and protecting against diabetes and heart disease.

“Eat a healthy breakfast of oats, berries, nuts or muesli. If people ate a healthy breakfast and had a salad for lunch, it would change health care in America profoundly.”

Dr. Andrew Klonecke, a physician specializing in nuclear medicine at Kaiser Permanente in Sacramento, used to consider

Healthy eating

For more information about the link between plant-based eating and disease prevention, there are several excellent online resources, including:

forksoverknives.com

nutritionfacts.org

pcrm.org (Physicians Committee For Responsible Medicine)

There are many books on the subject. Two of the best are:

“**The End of Dieting**” (HarperOne, \$15.99, 373 pages) By Joel Fuhrman, M.D.

“**How Not to Die**” (Flatiron Books, \$27.99, 562 pages) By Michael Greger, M.D.

himself a foodie, so much so that he would try to visit the 50 best restaurants ranked by Gourmet magazine. But his eating habits eventually caught up with him. By the time he was in his late 50s, Klonecke's health was at a serious crossroads.

“I was always heavy. I had high cholesterol. I even found out I had diabetes,” Klonecke said. “When I tried to alter my diet the old-fashioned way – control your portions, use your willpower – I had some success, but my sugar levels and cholesterol were not ideal.”

He wound up having six-way bypass heart surgery and was taking prescription medication for high cholesterol, among

other ailments.

“I had minimal symptoms and was an active person, but I ate very badly, meaning I ate a lot of rich foods. It was a diet high in animal proteins,” he said.

After the surgery, Klonecke got radical. He gave up meat. He avoided dairy. He turned his back on gourmet dining and embraced the whole foods, plant-based way of eating that continues to inch its way into the mainstream. That was six years ago.

His wife, Katherine, adopted that way of eating, too, even though she was in relatively good health. She created a website, veganmyheart.com, to chronicle their dietary journey and offer readers plant-based recipes.

“It was the realization that I, as well as pretty much everybody I knew, was not eating correctly,” he said. “Once I was on a plant-based diet, my cholesterol was lower than when I was on statins. My diabetes disappeared. My weight is the same now as when I was a senior in high school.

“I regret that I didn't do this 10 years ago. I wouldn't have needed to have the bypass.”

But if a highly educated physician had gone down the wrong path, nutritionally speaking, how are we to expect the rest of America to learn about and embrace the right way to eat?

Rosane Oliveira, director of the integrative medicine program at UC Davis, says it is often the patients, not the doctors, who lead the way for change in how disease is

treated. Created five years ago to focus on how plant-based nutrition can prevent chronic disease, her program seeks to teach a new generation of doctors to see food as a necessary component of good medicine.

“Most medical schools will have around 14 hours of nutrition over four years. They are learning the biochemistry of nutrition but not how it relates to disease or the reversal of disease,” said Oliveira, who teaches a class called Lifestyle Medicine, which delves much deeper into the link between eating well and living optimally.

For most people looking to improve their health, a radical overhaul of one's eating habits can seem daunting. Oliveira suggests making one meaningful change each month. In fact, during the second month of her class, she asks the students to give up cheese or, better still, dairy altogether.

“Over the course of a year, you've made 12 changes,” she said.

While she realizes that a focus on food for treating or even curing disease has yet to reach critical mass, Oliveira is convinced it's the right prescription for America.

“I believe the shift is going to come,” she said. “It has to be like everything else – a grass-roots movement. Why are more grocery stores carrying more plant-based foods? It comes from us asking about it.”

Blair Anthony Robertson:
916-321-1099, @Blarob