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Should You Eat Like a Caveman in the 21st Century?

In the last few years, “Paleo” or “Caveman” diets have received media attention. Advocates of this lifestyle propose that we should eat like people did during the Paleolithic era, otherwise known as the Stone Age. They recommend eating fish, meats, eggs, vegetables, fruits, nuts and mushrooms; and avoiding grains, dairy foods, cooked dry beans, oils, salt and refined sugars. They believe that since it has “only” been within the last 10,000 years that agriculture came into being, we humans have not yet evolved in our metabolism to handle digesting well the kinds of foods grown on farms.



Is there any health truth behind the hype?

Our very early ancestors were hunters and gatherers. Supporters of the Paleo diet contend that our caveman predecessors were strong boned, hearty and healthy. And if they died young, it was not because of disease, but because of accidents and a difficult environment.

Paleo diet promoters say that modern-day health problems (such as arthritis, osteoporosis, cancer, heart disease and other chronic diseases) did not exist during the Stone Age. But no one alive now can be sure of what diseases occurred then. And if those diseases were not present, is it because of the differences in diets or because of other differences?

A one-size-fits-all approach to diet does not work well. For individuals who are diagnosed as having food sensitivities and intolerances, yes, their health will improve if they avoid those foods that they cannot tolerate.

Overall, though, people living in the U.S. now live longer and enjoy fewer years of disability than ever before. And nutrition experts agree that the rise in obesity and obesity-related diseases over the past 30 years is not because Americans are eating too many whole grains, low-fat dairy products or cooked dry beans. Research supports the opposite: eating these foods improves health for most people. The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans advise eating double the amount of whole grains, low-fat dairy products and cooked dry beans that we currently get in the U.S.

We all can learn some important lessons from our more primitive ancestors. “Think like a caveman” to improve your health by following these guidelines:

- Most of the time, eat foods that are less processed, are low in added salt and added sugars, and are naturally rich in nutrients.
- Avoid long periods of just sitting. Be at least moderately physically active for 30 to 60 minutes on most days. Although we no longer scavenge and hunt for most of our meals, our bodies were designed to be moved often!

For additional information, contact the Wildcat Extension District, Crawford County, 620-724-8233, Labette County, 620-784-5337, Montgomery County, 620-331-2690, Pittsburg Office, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education (EFNEP), 620-232-1930. Our website is <http://www.wildcatdistrict.k-state.edu/> or follow us on Facebook: Wildcat Extension District.

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