

James L. Holly, M.D.

Cardiometabolic Risk Syndrome Part XI Healthy Eating: The Age of Nutritionism

By James L. Holly, MD

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Your Life Your Health

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As we conclude our series on the Cardiometabolic Risk Syndrome, we focus on “what should we eat?” In the January 28, 2007, New York Times Magazine, Michael Pollan’s “The Age of Nutritionism” was published. There is not a better summary of what we should eat than his article. The full article can be found on line. The follow are excerpts from it.

“Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants! That, more or less, is the short answer to the supposedly incredibly complicated and confusing question of what we humans should eat in order to be maximally healthy

Pollan said, “I hate to give away the game right here at the beginning of a long essay, and I confess that I’m tempted to complicate matters in the interest of keeping things going for a few thousand more words. I’ll try to resist but will go ahead and add a couple more details to flesh out the advice. Like: A little meat won’t kill you, though it’s better approached as a side dish than as a main. And you’re much better off eating whole fresh foods than processed food products. That’s what I mean by the recommendation to eat ‘food.’”

“Once, food was all you could eat, but today there are lots of other edible food-like substances in the supermarket. These novel products of food science often come in packages festooned with health claims, which brings me to a related rule of thumb: if you’re concerned about your health, you should probably avoid food products that make health claims. Why? Because a health claim on a food product is a good indication that it’s not really food, and food is what you want to eat.

“Things are suddenly sounding a little more complicated, aren’t they? Sorry. But that’s how it goes as soon as you try to get to the bottom of the whole vexing question of food and health. Before long, a dense cloud bank of confusion moves in. Sooner or later, everything solid you thought you knew about the links between diet and health gets blown away in the gust of the latest study.

“The first thing to understand about nutritionism — I first encountered the term in the work of an Australian sociologist of science named Gyorgy Scrinis — is that it is not quite the same as nutrition. As the ‘ism’ suggests, it is not a scientific subject but an ideology. Ideologies are ways of organizing large swaths of life and experience under a set of shared but unexamined assumptions. This quality makes an ideology particularly hard to see, at least while it’s exerting its hold on your culture. A reigning ideology is a little like the

weather, all pervasive and virtually inescapable. Still, we can try.

“In the case of nutritionism, the widely shared but unexamined assumption is that the key to understanding food is indeed the nutrient. From this basic premise flow several others. Since nutrients, as compared with foods, are invisible and therefore slightly mysterious, it falls to the scientists (and to the journalists through whom the scientists speak) to explain the hidden reality of foods to us. To enter a world in which you dine on unseen nutrients, you need lots of expert help.

“But expert help to do what, exactly? This brings us to another unexamined assumption: that the whole point of eating is to maintain and promote bodily health. Hippocrates’s famous injunction to “let food be thy medicine” is ritually invoked to support this notion. I’ll leave the premise alone for now, except to point out that it is not shared by all cultures and that the experience of these other cultures suggests that, paradoxically, viewing food as being about things other than bodily health — like pleasure, say, or socializing — makes people no less healthy; indeed, there’s some reason to believe that it may make them more healthy. This is what we usually have in mind when we speak of the ‘French paradox’ — the fact that a population that eats all sorts of unhealthy nutrients is in many ways healthier than we Americans are. So there is at least a question as to whether nutritionism is actually any good for you.

“Another potentially serious weakness of nutritionist ideology is that it has trouble discerning qualitative distinctions between foods. So fish, beef and chicken through the nutritionists’ lens become mere delivery systems for varying quantities of fats and proteins and whatever other nutrients are on their scope. Similarly, any qualitative distinctions between processed foods and whole foods disappear when your focus is on quantifying the nutrients they contain (or, more precisely, the known nutrients).

“This is a great boon for manufacturers of processed food, and it helps explain why they have been so happy to get with the nutritionism program. In the years following McGovern’s capitulation and the 1982 National Academy report, the food industry set about re-engineering thousands of popular food products to contain more of the nutrients that science and government had deemed the good ones and less of the bad, and by the late ’80s a golden era of food science was upon us. *The Year of Eating Oat Bran* — also known as 1988 — served as a kind of coming-out party for the food scientists, who succeeded in getting the material into nearly every processed food sold in America. Oat bran’s moment on the dietary stage didn’t last long, but the pattern had been established, and every few years since then a new oat bran has taken its turn under the marketing lights. (Here comes omega-3!)

“By comparison, the typical real food has more trouble competing under the rules of nutritionism, if only because something like a banana or an avocado can’t easily change its nutritional stripes (though rest assured the genetic engineers are hard at work on the problem). So far, at least, you can’t put oat bran in a banana. So depending on the reigning nutritional orthodoxy, the avocado might be either a high-fat food to be avoided (Old Think) or a food high in monounsaturated fat to be embraced (New Think). The fate of each whole food rises and falls with every change in the nutritional weather, while the processed foods are simply

reformulated. That's why when the Atkins mania hit the food industry, bread and pasta were given a quick redesign (dialing back the carbs; boosting the protein), while the poor unreconstructed potatoes and carrots were left out in the cold.

“Of course it's also a lot easier to slap a health claim on a box of sugary cereal than on a potato or carrot, with the perverse result that the most healthful foods in the supermarket sit there quietly in the produce section, silent as stroke victims, while a few aisles over, the Cocoa Puffs and Lucky Charms are screaming about their newfound whole-grain goodness.”

“The case of the antioxidants points up the dangers in taking a nutrient out of the context of food; as Nestle suggests, scientists make a second, related error when they study the food out of the context of the diet. We don't eat just one thing, and when we are eating any one thing, we're not eating another. We also eat foods in combinations and in orders that can affect how they're absorbed. Drink coffee with your steak, and your body won't be able to fully absorb the iron in the meat. The trace of limestone in the corn tortilla unlocks essential amino acids in the corn that would otherwise remain unavailable. Some of those compounds in that sprig of thyme may well affect my digestion of the dish I add it to, helping to break down one compound or possibly stimulate production of an enzyme to detoxify another. We have barely begun to understand the relationships among foods in a cuisine.

“But we do understand some of the simplest relationships, like the zero-sum relationship: that if you eat a lot of meat you're probably not eating a lot of vegetables. This simple fact may explain why populations that eat diets high in meat have higher rates of coronary heart disease and cancer than those that don't. Yet nutritionism encourages us to look elsewhere for the explanation: deep within the meat itself, to the culpable nutrient, which scientists have long assumed to be the saturated fat. So they are baffled when large-population studies, like the Women's Health Initiative, fail to find that reducing fat intake significantly reduces the incidence of heart disease or cancer.

“But what about the elephant in the room — the Western diet? It might be useful, in the midst of our deepening confusion about nutrition, to review what we do know about diet and health. What we know is that people who eat the way we do in America today suffer much higher rates of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and obesity than people eating more traditional diets. (Four of the 10 leading killers in America are linked to diet.) Further, we know that simply by moving to America, people from nations with low rates of these “diseases of affluence” will quickly acquire them. Nutritionism by and large takes the Western diet as a given, seeking to moderate its most deleterious effects by isolating the bad nutrients in it — things like fat, sugar, salt — and encouraging the public and the food industry to limit them. But after several decades of nutrient-based health advice, rates of cancer and heart disease in the U.S. have declined only slightly (mortality from heart disease is down since the '50s, but this is mainly because of improved treatment), and rates of obesity and diabetes have soared.”

As it is your life and for you health, it really can't be said better, “Eat food.” Limit your meat intake and “gorge yourself on vegetables and fruits.” Couple this with exercise and avoiding smoking and you are on your way to a healthy life style.