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"Sugar, Salt and Saturated Fatty Acids"

Your Life Your Health

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The American diet is typically filled with sugar, salt and saturated fatty acids. All three are used to increase the profitability of food sales by extending the shelf life of processed foods and by increasing the "palatability" of foods. And, all three are major contributors to health problems.

Sugar's negative effects range from hyperactivity in children to the decay of teeth. Often, excessive sugar is added to natural products to "enhance" their taste, resulting only in distorting the natural taste of food. Restaurants often add sugar to vegetables to make them more "palatable" and therefore more "sellable." Salt, in excessive amounts, is added to foods as a preservative. Societies in which salt is not a part of the diet have no high blood pressure. And, salt contributes not only to hypertension, but to other health hazards as well. Processed foods are filled with both salt and saturated fats in order to extend their "shelf life." Amazingly, almost anything which extends the shelf life of food, shortens the life of those who consume those foods.

Two things, which are very simple to do, will improve the health of your family immediately: remove the sugar bowl and the saltshaker from the table. Retraining your taste buds to enjoy the natural flavor of foods takes a while, but the benefits are enormous. An example is tea. Freshly prepared tea, whether hot or iced, is delicious when sugar is not added. Poorly prepared, old, diluted or inferior teas can be bitter. The solution is not to add sugar. The solution is to request fresh tea, or to ask that tea be prepared properly. Artificial sweeteners are not a solution either. We already know that all artificial sweeteners present a number of health hazards and they distorted the natural flavor of foods even more than natural sweeteners. One solution to helping make the transition to no sugar is to use natural sweeteners such as honey. And, honey provides a number of health benefits, some of which relate to allergies.

While a salt-free diet, like a fat-free diet, is almost inedible, the excessive use of salt will lead to fluid retention and ultimately to elevated blood pressure in some cases. However salt, unlike processed sugar, is a natural occurring substance and is essential in small amounts to good health. The problem is the salt shaker. Preparing fresh food with small amounts of salt enhances the flavor; adding salt at the table contributes to a bad habit and ultimately to bad health.

The third category of unhealthy things which Americans consume in excessive amounts is saturated fats. The problem is Americans are not only addicted to sugar and salt, but to the taste of saturated fats. Animal fat is the most common source of saturated fats along with fried foods prepared in animal fat. Added to sugar and salt, saturated fats contribute to hypertension, kidney disease, diabetes, obesity and heart disease in Americans. Combined with a common sense exercise program, the elimination of sugar, the decreasing of salt intake, and the modification of saturated fatty acids in the diet, will contribute significantly to a general improvement in one's appearance, sense of well being and health.

One of the best ways of decreasing the saturated fats in one's diet is to substitute unsaturated and monosaturated fats. Using cooking oils other than those obtained from animal fat is a first big step. Here are the percentages of fat contents of common cooking oil substitutes:

Source of fat	monosaturated	polyunsaturated	saturated
Olive Oil	77%	9%	14%
Canola Oil	62%	32%	6%
Peanut Oil	49%	33%	18%

Corn Oil	25%	62%	13%
Soybean Oil	24%	61%	15%
Sunflower Oil	20%	69%	11%
Safflower Oil	13%	77%	10%

Americans could benefit from the increasing use of olive oil in their diet. While it is not conclusive, there are strong suggestions that the increased use of Olive Oil contributes to lower cholesterol and to improved cardiac health. The increased use of olive oil has been historically associated with a lower incidence of heart disease in the Mediterranean area.

With this in mind, prominent scientists recently designed an alternative to the popular USDA Food Guide Pyramid. Conceived by the Harvard School of Public Health, the World Health Organization and the non-profit Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust, the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid emphasizes the consumption of specific foods. The pyramid has a base of increased use of whole grains and pasta and a point at the top of decreased use of red meat and animal fat.

Acknowledging that eating is only a part of the whole, the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid also recommends regular physical exercise. Fat in the Mediterranean diet is mainly olive oil, instead of that from meat and dairy, as in the U.S. The pyramid calls for the substitution of olive oil, rich in monounsaturated fatty acids, for butter and other animal fats, which are highly saturated. The diet recommends a sprinkling of paper thin shavings of imported cheese, rather than using too much of a mild cheese that isn't as flavorful. And, the diet pyramid recommends that Americans learn to enjoy a variety of vegetables rather than the typical meat, potato and vegetable plate for dinner. The key is "learning." Dietary habits are learned. New and good habits can be taught.

The Mediterranean Diet consists of:

- A variety of vegetables, bread, cereals
- Fruits
- Small to average quantities of animal products
- Olive oil as the main source for fats
- Low saturated fatty acids
- A lot of carbohydrates and fibers.

Little changes make a big difference in the long run. Start walking, stop shaking (salt) and plant a garden. Remember, it's your life and your health.