

CHAPTER FIVE

CHANGING YOUR DIET

When I made the switch to a vegan (strict vegetarian), low-fat diet, I found that, for the first time in my life, my bowels functioned the way they were supposed to. In previous years I could not eat very much food for fear of gaining weight. I was, as a result, always hungry and had rabbit-pellet-sized stools which were brought forth only under great strain. I thought, because physicians had told me, that two or three bowel movements a week were probably “normal” for me. The day after I changed my diet I discovered what “normal” is supposed to be!

It is very obvious from all the TV, radio, magazine, and other ads that constipation and hemorrhoids are common in this country. Had I weighed and measured the stools of other cultures, as did Sir Denis Burkitt, M.D., I would have found out that most of these people had large, bulky, soft stools that moved effortlessly, frequently, and had a transit time (time of travel from mouth to anus) of eight hours or less as opposed to thirty-six to fifty-two hours seen in this country and England where Sir Denis did his ground-breaking research.¹ I would have also found out that there were entire societies without a single case of hemorrhoids—indeed, they did not even know what they were.

No longer was I plagued with having to worry about being able to move my bowels before a race or with having to make an emergency pit stop during a race. A proper diet actually normalizes the intestinal tract, and I have had to relearn this lesson occasionally, usually when I am traveling and not able to get my usual amount of fiber.

Diverticulosis is another affliction that is common in this country and rare in low-fat, high-fiber-diet countries. Diverticula are little “outpouchings” that occur in the intestines when the peristaltic (muscular contractions) movements do not have enough bulk to “grab.” It’s

rather like inflating a balloon with weak spots. The weak spots in the intestines bulge out and create little pockets. These diverticula are prone to irritation, inflammation, and infection, and can be very painful. When the condition reaches this stage, it's called diverticulitis and, like so many other afflictions in this country, it's preventable.

Amazingly, another preventable side effect so many people in this country suffer from is hunger pangs. This is caused from not having enough food in the stomach. Many people try to control their weight by just eating less, the "push away from the table" method, and, therefore, suffer from hunger. The problem is that it doesn't work. Even if they manage to lose a few pounds, once they go back to their old ways of eating, they gain all the weight back, and then some. Compare the difference between 100 calories of oil (one tablespoon) and 100 calories of potato (a large one). Which will do a better job of filling you up?

Double or Even Triple Your Pleasure!

What most people don't know is that they can actually eat two to three times as much food (quantity-wise) and still lose weight! Most plant foods are very low in calories, so one can fill up and feel satisfied on this program. The exceptions are nuts, seeds, avocados, olives, and coconuts.

Since the hunger drive is one of the most powerful of drives, most people who try to deprive themselves soon succumb and will frequently go overboard once they decide "the heck with it" and the body compensates for the period of "starvation." Then come the guilt pangs, new resolutions, and the cycle begins again. Then, because the body senses that the starvation period is over with and food again is plentiful, it starts restoring (re-storing, literally) its fat reserves. It does this as a survival mechanism to get ready for the next period of "starvation." The bad news is that the body gets more efficient at laying in fat stores, and you end up with a higher body-fat percentage and a lower lean body mass. This means there is less muscle with which to burn up calories, and that is one reason why the body puts the fat back on more easily.

This is also why exercise is so important; it combats the tendency to lose muscle and may, in fact, add it instead. That is why low calorie diets don't work. Whenever you start restricting food intake,

you are up against this most powerful of survival mechanisms. If people only knew that they could eat as much as they wanted, that they could eat until they were completely satisfied, and that they could even lose weight on such a plan, wouldn't you wonder why they wouldn't all do it? Boy, I sure do!

I have all my favorite foods, starting in the morning with oatmeal, bananas, and raisins moistened with water or apple juice and a teaspoon of blackstrap molasses. This is quite filling and sustains a good early morning workout or race. From then on, I usually "graze" on whole grains, vegetables eaten raw—such as carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower—and fruits like apples, oranges, and more bananas and raisins.

Lunches and dinners are usually centered on potatoes or rice. Sweet potatoes, yams, and regular white potatoes can be sliced and microwaved for five or ten minutes for nearly instant satisfaction. One of my favorite foods is plain brown rice. Its nutty, chewy flavor is so superior to white rice that I find it amazing that some people still eat the white. Besides tasting better, brown rice is much higher in fiber and the vitamin-B complex. I cook mine in an automatic rice cooker, using two-to-one proportions of water to rice. It doesn't even take any longer to cook, being usually ready in about twenty-five minutes. It's even faster in a pressure cooker. I love brown rice plain or as a base for chili, tomato-based sauce for Spanish Rice, or with water-sautéed chopped vegetables a quick and easy chop suey.

Dessert is usually a large (four-quart size) bowl of air-popped, plain popcorn. This keeps both hands and mouth fully occupied and has all kinds of positive benefits—such as lots of fiber and vitamin-B complex—and tastes great once you get past the need for salt and butter.

I have been eating like this for almost twenty years. What I've found is that plain, whole, unprocessed food can taste great. I'll admit that I made the dietary change literally under the threat of death. But I also immediately rediscovered the wholesome good taste of pure, plain, unadulterated food.

But What Does It Do for Energy?

I found my energy levels soaring! Wouldn't you agree that this would have to be the case in order to train for an event like the Ironman Triathlon?

I rarely take a day off from training, and when I do it's usually from the press of other business. I rarely cut short a workout, and when I do it's most frequently from running out of time.

I sleep like the proverbial rock and rarely suffer from any kind of depression or moodiness. The most frequent comment I hear from my coaches and friends is that I race too much. I'm delighted when I hear this from "youngsters" twenty to thirty years younger than me. And, in fact, I do race a lot, as detailed in my first chapter. I've been doing on the average fifty races a year ever since my diagnosis, and hit a new high of sixty-three races in 1997. That is at least one race almost every weekend all year around. I would do more except that most of the races start at the same time, 7:00 a.m. Sunday mornings!

But Where Do You Get Your ____ (Fill in the Blank)?

I cite all this as evidence that a vegan, low-fat diet can't be all that deficient in calories, protein, calcium, essential fatty acids, minerals, and all those other factors that detractors usually quote.

Calories come from all the macronutrients—protein, fat, and carbohydrates. The preferred source of energy for our muscles, however, is carbohydrates. The best source of carbohydrates is plant foods; in fact, animal food provides little if any carbohydrates. Getting enough calories is a matter of balancing calorie-dense foods such as grains and dried fruit with low-calorie density foods such as green, leafy vegetables. This is how to control weight loss and weight gain.

There is no way that you can be deficient in protein as long as you are eating enough in calories. You will also get all the essential amino acids with a plant-based diet since all vegetables and grains contain adequate amounts of all the essential amino acids. Some people will have to go back and read that sentence again. In the popular press I have frequently found the perpetuation of the myth that either you need animal protein or you need to "combine" protein, or that soy beans are the only complete protein. None of this is true, and it becomes obvious when one looks up the essential amino acid content in foods such as rice, potatoes, corn, oats, broccoli, taro, and all the green, leafy vegetables. These foods possess complete proteins and if eaten in sufficient quantity to satisfy calorie needs will satisfy our protein needs.

The problem in Western society, however, is not one of getting enough protein; it is rather getting too much protein. And if that protein is of animal origin, you put yourself at risk for osteoporosis, kidney failure, arthritis, allergies, and respiratory problems such as asthma, mucous formation, and sinusitis.

You will get enough calcium since you are getting it from the same sources that cows, horses, elephants, and rhinos get theirs—which is plant foods, primarily greens. In any case, the problem is usually not one of calcium deficiency but of protein excess. When you eat too much protein (amino acids), the body has to buffer all that acid, which it does with calcium from our bones.

Fat

People frequently say, “But we need some fat in our diet.” Yes, we do need some. These are the essential fatty acids, which we get from most every food we eat. For example, lettuce is thirteen percent fat, celery six percent fat, and oatmeal sixteen percent fat. The problem is not that we’re getting too little fat but that we’re usually getting too much.

This also means no added vegetable oil or margarine. You don’t need it, and if you add it, it raises your dietary fat percentage to levels where cancer, especially breast cancer and probably prostate cancer, becomes a risk. Margarine is not a good substitute for butter for a number of reasons. Although margarine has no cholesterol itself, because it has to be hydrogenated to make it solid at room temperature, unnatural fat is created. In order to manufacture margarine, the fat molecules must be converted to trans-fatty acids, a key component of hardened vegetable oils. This formation of trans-fatty acids alters the structure of the fat molecule. Besides raising cholesterol, the use of margarine blocks the action of prostaglandins which help to lower blood pressure and increase removal of sodium from the body.² All fats—margarine and vegetable oils as well—seem to increase the incidence of all types of cancer. So, it seems not to matter whether it’s saturated, monounsaturated, or polyunsaturated. Keep your fat percentage as low as possible. T. Colin Campbell in the China Diet Study found that the lower the fat, the healthier the people, down to five percent of calories from fat.³

Lots of people feel so much better eating this way that most who have switched would never go back to the old way. What I have found is that this eating program actually promotes an exercise program. You do more because you feel so good!

What about Carbo-loading?

Carbo-loading is a technique used by some athletes to increase the amount of glycogen, a carbohydrate in the form of sugar that the muscles can use. When you have a hard training bout or a race, you use up your glycogen. You then need to replace it by eating carbohydrates. If you are eating a vegan diet, you don't need to do anything different since you are carbo-loading every day. As a result, you are always ready for anything—training or races in most any sport!

The Secret to Health and Fitness

I remember one day after completing a two-mile swim having a “revelation”: The “secret” to health and fitness is what you put in your body and how you move it around. The idea should be to put in nothing but good food and move it around with lots of exercise. It all seems so simple. Every one of the trillions of cells in our body has three requirements: nutrients, oxygen, and removal of waste products. The proper diet takes care of the first and exercise takes care of the second and third!

This chapter on nutrition would not be complete without addressing one of the most common plagues of the Western world—obesity. Obesity is actually a symptom of an improper diet in conjunction with a sedentary lifestyle. There are people who go from one diet to another, or one commercial weight loss program to another. They've spent literally thousands of dollars and still have fat, overweight bodies.

The issue with many people is cosmetic. This is best illustrated by the popularity of liposuction surgery. With these people, health is obviously not the major motivator—aesthetics or cosmetics are. This is not to put down the importance of feeling good about how you look. I think that looking good is extremely important and plays a major role in our self-esteem. You just need to know that you can have a beautiful, slim, sexy body by adopting the lifestyle that will give this to you.

Since the majority of this population will at some time in their life go on a calorie-reduction diet to try to lose weight, let's talk a little more about why weight-reduction or calorie-restricting diets don't work. As soon as you go off the diet and back to eating the diet that caused the problem in the first place, you'll likely regain all the lost weight and then some, because the body "learns" how to deposit fat more efficiently.

Okay, Limit Your Oxygen!

There's no way to beat the system. We humans have, for the most part, pretty strong survival mechanisms. For example, we need oxygen. Now, try to deprive yourself of air. True, you can hold your breath for a couple of minutes, but the drive to breathe will prevail. Try to deprive yourself of sleep. True, you can stay up one, two, or maybe even up to ten nights, but the drive to sleep will also prevail. After only a day or two, the brain will be grabbing micro-sleeps. Now, try to deprive someone of food. Tell them that they can eat only seventy-five percent of what they normally eat. They probably will start obsessing about hot fudge sundaes, chocolate candy bars, and banana splits. They probably could stick to the seventy-five percent program for a little while, depending on the rewards, but not for very long.

Can you imagine a weight loss center saying to you, "Okay, we're going to put you on a restricted oxygen diet. You can only take three-quarters of your normal breath for the next week. Check back in with us, and we'll see how you're doing"?

Since you're all motivated, you charge out the door determined to follow the instructions. How successful do you think you will be?

Well, you're dealing with a very similar situation when you tamper with the drive for food. "Willpower" will keep you going for a little while, but your drive for survival should win. If it doesn't, you risk ending up like Karen Carpenter, the popular young singer who died of anorexia. Even if your "willpower" lasts long enough to get your weight down, it will not stay down when you go back to your old eating habits. Most people will soon chuck the whole idea and binge to make up for the lost food. That's why the whole system of dieting fails, regardless of whether it's a self-imposed, medical, or commercial program. (You can read more about obesity and weight control in Chapter Eight.)

In order to lose weight and keep it lost, you must make a lifestyle change, and this lifestyle change must include a change to a low-fat diet along with lots of exercise. There's been a lot of press lately on best-selling books on dieting that proclaim that low-fat diets don't work. They promote high-protein diets instead. But these books are not telling the truth about those folks who are successfully living on a low-fat, vegan diet. The vegan diet does work, and there are millions who are here to attest to that fact.

The other part of the problem is that people want to hear that it's all right to eat the animal foods they think would be too difficult for them to give up. The sad news is that the health of these people is severely compromised in the long run. The answer is to let the body eat as much as it wants just as it breathes and sleeps as much as it wants. It will, anyway! None of this is in your control. What you can control, however, is what food is available.

A weight control program begins with your grocery shopping. My rule is to shop only at the edges of the store. Depending, of course, on the layout, you'll find the produce section on one end and the breads on another. So you can go "hog wild" with the vegetables, fruits, and whole grains.

If It Has a Face or a Label, Don't Eat It!

Here's a little rule of thumb: If it comes from anything that had a face, eyes that look back at you, or had a Mom and a Dad, don't eat it. If it fits those criteria, it also has muscles, and all muscles have cholesterol and saturated fat. These two substances cause major damage to our bodies, clog our circulatory system, and depress our immune system. Cholesterol leads to heart disease and strokes; saturated fat to cancer. These are the first, second, and third causes of death in this country. That's why I promote a vegan diet—no animal products whatsoever.

Another little rule I follow came about as a result of hearing all the admonitions to read the food labels. Labels are only found on foods that come in boxes, cans, tins, or jars. This rule is: If it has a label on it, don't eat it; or at least be very suspicious! Now I know that may sound a little extreme, but if it has a label, it usually means that it's been processed, i.e., had something removed or added. Either way, you lose.

Stick to whole foods and you can't go wrong. All one has to do is look at elephants, giraffes, and most primates and realize that they get all the nutrients they need from plant sources. These vegetarian animals, by the way, have a much longer life span than meat-eating animals do, living more than twice as long.

But You Do Eat Fish, Don't You?

I hear this question all the time, and then I see the shocked expression that follows my emphatic, "No, absolutely not!"

Predictably, the response is, "But what's wrong with fish?" Well, there's a lot that's wrong with fish.

We know that too much animal protein increases your risk of osteoporosis (see Chapter Six) and fish qualifies as a concentrated source of protein. Since most people get too much protein, we don't need fish for that reason. What about the omega-3 fatty acids that are supposed to be so good for you? Well, if you are eating a diet with lots of leafy green vegetables, you are getting your omega-3 fatty acids from the same source that fish do—fish get their greens from seaweed or algae.

The flesh of fish is also one of the most contaminated of foods. Even fish found in open oceans are exposed to pesticides, herbicides, and heavy metals such as mercury, lead, cadmium, and arsenic. They are also sources of hepatitis, polio, E. coli, *Salmonella*, *Ciguatera* poisoning, and an array of parasites such as *Anasakis simplex* (a gastrointestinal worm), and *Clonorchis sinensis* (a liver fluke).⁴ So, there are many reasons to eat a plant-based diet and no reasons not to. Besides, this diet tastes delicious and makes you feel fabulous. What else could you ask for from a diet?

Getting Started: Food Tips and Recipes

Setting up your kitchen is much easier on this program. The following kitchen tools are useful: baking dishes, chopping block, cooking spoons, colander, grater, measuring cups and spoons, mixing bowls, muffin tins, paring and chopping knives, pizza pans, non-stick pots and pans in various sizes, soup ladle, sprouting jars and lids. I also cannot get along without my automatic rice cooker, slow-cooker, air-popper, and electric wok for an almost infinite variety of stir-fry (with water) dishes.

Staple foods to keep on hand are a variety of whole grains (oatmeal, brown rice, wheat berries, buckwheat flour, etc.), vegetables (potatoes, carrots, cabbage, onions, garlic, tomatoes, broccoli, etc.), fruit (bananas, apples, berries, melons, raisins, etc.), and spices (basil, chili powder, cumin, mustard, oregano, sage, thyme, turmeric, etc.). With these foods on hand, you can make a healthful variety of delicious meals.

The following are guidelines for beverages, meals, snacks, desserts, and cleanup. At the end of the book is a seven-day meal plan and supporting recipes.

Beverages: The best drink in the world is nature's purest: water. It used to be considered gauche to order water as your beverage in a restaurant. Thank goodness those days are long gone. Since I frequently have just come from a workout, I am usually very thirsty and not only order water but a very large glass of it. The same is true if I'm at a party, cocktail or otherwise. If I really want to celebrate, I'll have a club soda with a twist!

For variety's sake, there are two other beverages that I recommend. First thing in the morning, as a coffee substitute, mix one teaspoon of blackstrap molasses in a cup of hot water. Not only is this beverage stimulant-free, but it also gives you a good percentage of the day's allotment of iron, calcium, and other minerals.

The second beverage that I keep on hand in the refrigerator is a large jug of lemonade—the old-fashioned kind. I squeeze half a lemon into a half-gallon jug of water, adding just enough sweetener to take the edge off. This is a wonderful, healthy thirst-quencher. It is also the only juice I drink and I don't strain it. In general, I eat the whole fruit to get the entire fiber and the bulkiness that fruit gives. It helps keep the appetite under control, too.

Breakfast: My breakfast usually consists of a bowl of oatmeal, cooked very quickly in a microwave oven (two minutes) or sometimes not even cooked because I like it raw, too. It does not matter whether it's regular or quick cooking oatmeal since the quick cooking version is just rolled thinner. I add raisins, bananas, and a little blackstrap molasses to make a wonderful, filling treat. Then in order to boost its nutritional value, I add greens. This may sound a little strange to

some of you, but just try it! The first time I tried this was when I was at the 1988 Seoul Olympics at the athletes' training table. Because there were so many Asians and many of them ate greens in the form of seaweed for breakfast, I decided to try it and liked it. Then I tried other greens such as kale, edible hibiscus, and even cabbage. Since greens are the "gold standard" of nutrition, I try to get them as often as possible, even at breakfast.

For special breakfasts, I make pancakes or waffles. For toppings, I add applesauce or fruit purée. Naturally, I skip the butter or margarine: It's not at all necessary for a satisfying taste once you get used to the delicious flavors of the other ingredients.

This selection also works for breakfasts eaten out. You can almost always find pancakes on the menu. Some of the more health-conscious restaurants make whole wheat or buckwheat pancakes, which, of course, are better for you than the standard white flour-mix pancakes. Again, be sure to leave out the butter and margarine. While others may be raising their cholesterol and fat levels with egg-based breakfasts, you can be doing your body a favor and enjoy your breakfast just as much.

Lunches: Mid-day meals can consist of any one of many different selections. Some possibilities are: baked or microwaved potatoes with carrot and broccoli sticks, whole wheat pita bread stuffed with sliced mixed vegetables, a whole wheat bagel with an orange and an apple, brown rice mixed with frozen succotash, and so on. This can also make a great brown-bag lunch.

One of my favorite ploys when I'm eating out and something like roast beef sandwiches are being served, is to ask for a "bread sandwich"! This also works in fast food places as well. A whole grain bun or a couple of slices of bread along with a salad (greens, tomato, bell pepper, onions, etc.) stuffed in between is adequate, especially if it's a rye or whole grain bread. Whole grain sourdough bread is also sometimes an option.

Dinners: My last meal of the day may be any one of the options listed above. If I feel like cooking, I make one of the following recipes:

- Spaghetti made with whole-wheat pasta and sauce made with tomato paste, onions, garlic, bell peppers, chopped broccoli, and sea-

sonings, (the chopped broccoli flowerets can fool people into thinking you've got meatballs in the paste!).

- Chili made with kidney beans, tomato sauce, onions, garlic, bell pepper, chili powder, and lots of brown rice.
- Pizza made with a whole-wheat crust covered with a tomato-based sauce with chopped green onions, round onions, bell peppers, mushrooms, and alfalfa sprouts. For an "instant" crust, use pita bread or chapattis.

One of the nice things about eating this way is that you can modify almost any of your old favorite dishes. Just skip the animal products, fats, and oils. When you skip meat, increase the veggies. When you skip oils, increase the water. If you need to stir-fry or sauté anything, do it with water or soy sauce. It works very well.

Go to some of the ethnic grocery stores to get ideas for some really interesting foods. For example, Asian grocery stores in your neighborhood sometimes sell many different types of rice. Salads are usually a healthy selection, but can be pretty dull if they consist of the usual iceberg lettuce with a slice of tomato. While browsing through the produce section, look at the variety of cabbages and other greens available, especially some of the newer varieties. They are usually inexpensive, especially relative to meat, and make such interesting combinations of dark greens, reds, and textures. You can also add snow peas, bean sprouts, corn, okra, eggplant, or whatever you see that looks good. Get creative with some of the gourmet greens now available!

With regard to salad dressings, I long ago decided to skip them. I love salads just plain. For those who can't handle that, sprinkle some Balsamic vinegar or lemon juice on the veggies.

Grazing: This is what I do between meals: I nibble on fruit, carrots, whole grain breads, air-popped popcorn, sweet potatoes, almost anything I have in the house. If you keep the high-fat foods out of the house, they can't tempt you. Remember: With this way of eating, you get to eat a lot, eat often, and not gain weight as long as you are exercising enough.

Desserts: To satisfy that sweet tooth and still have a healthy dessert, try any of the many varieties of fruits in season. Or, if that's not an

option, frozen fruit is a possibility. I especially like air-popped popcorn and have it every night. I like it just plain, but if you need to flavor it, spritz it with diluted soy sauce or sprinkle cinnamon on it.

Cost: One last point concerns expense. You will be amazed how little this food program costs. Nobody believes me when I tell him or her how little I spend a month on food. I walk out with sacks of groceries because potatoes, cabbage, onions, papayas, apples, oranges, bananas etc. are very bulky, giving you a lot for your money.

One of the reasons you save so much money is that you are not paying for fancy packaging. This can be one of your contributions to the well being of the planet by not producing so much garbage. Remember there's no "away" when you "throw your garbage away." You will be doing your part in protecting the environment from the ravages of our industrial society, with its wanton use of resources to make all this packaging available. But, primarily, the cost is less because it requires no labor to process and refine natural foods. And there's less labor for you, too. It really doesn't take all that much time to prepare your own foods. You don't need a lot of fancy recipes to make good, nourishing, filling meals—unless you want to. I have written a cookbook with over 100 recipes that meet my CHEF criteria, Cheap, Healthy, Easy, and Fat-free.⁵ These are recipes that I acquired or developed over the years that make fueling your body "a piece of cake." You can find some at the back of this book.

Oh, yes. There is another advantage that you will enjoy. Clean-up is so much easier and faster without grease splatters and with no oily film on dishes, pots, and pans, Even your sink drains will cheer! So how can you pass up such a deal? You can help yourself to glowing good health, save money, and be an environmentalist at the same time.