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## Why the Western Diet Keeps Making Us Sick

Following the typical Western diet increases the risk of chronic illness and early death. Here's why changing the way you eat may help you live a longer, healthier life.

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Let's face it, Americans eat way too much. More than two-thirds of adults and nearly one-third of children and youth are overweight or obese, according to the *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* [report](#).

For the past 30 years, we've increased our intake of fatty, [processed foods](#) while getting little to no exercise and not nearly enough sleep.

"Over the past century, we've seen the incidence of chronic diseases go up dramatically in Western culture, and that's due to changes in our lifestyle, diet, and environment," says [Eugene Chang, MD](#), the Martin Boyer Professor in the department of medicine at the University of Chicago.

In fact, about half of American adults have one or more diet-related chronic diseases such as [heart disease](#), [high blood pressure](#), [type 2 diabetes](#), and certain cancers, the [report](#) states.

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More and more evidence shows that the types of food we eat have a worsening effect on our [gut health](#) and immune system, which play major roles in protecting our overall health. Researchers say that changing the way we eat could help prevent us

from getting sick sooner — or later — in life.

## What Is in the Western Diet and Why Do People Eat It?

The Western diet is made up of food that's loaded with saturated fats and refined sugars and contains little fiber and healthy fats (like omega-3 fatty acids), says [Ian Myles, MD, MPH](#), an assistant clinical investigator at the laboratory of clinical infectious disease at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, one of the NIH institutes.

"Most processed foods contain these saturated fats and sugars," Dr. Myles says.

According to a [study published in January 2016 in \*BMJ Open\*](#), more than half of Americans' calories come from "ultra-processed" foods, which contain tons of sodium, synthetic trans fats, and artificial sweeteners to make them more flavorful and extend their shelf life. Some [ultra-processed foods](#) include:

Certain breads like white bread

Potato chips

Packaged snack cakes

Frozen pizza

Candy

Soft drinks

What makes processed foods appealing is that they're convenient, says Dr. Chang. "We don't have time to cook for ourselves, so we immediately go to what's packaged or available — plus, these foods are cheap."

But choosing cheaper, more convenient foods can end up costing you more later.

Eighty-six percent of the nation's \$2.7 trillion annual healthcare costs are for people with chronic and mental health conditions, according to the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#). Also, medical costs linked to obesity were estimated to be \$147 billion in 2008.

"Understand that the price you're paying for that soda may be cheap now, but ultimately, it will get costly if you're sick," Chang says.

## The Western Diet Takes a Toll on Gut Bacteria

The digestive tract is home to trillions of microorganisms — bacteria, yeasts, fungi, and viruses, collectively known as the microbiome — that helps the body digest food, prevent infections, regulate our metabolism and control the immune system. An ideal gut environment is one that's packed with diverse bacteria — some harmful, others beneficial.

But research is showing that eating a high-fat, high-sugar diet kills off essential bacteria in the gut, throwing it off balance and causing certain bodily mechanisms, like the immune system, to malfunction.

A [paper published in August 2017 in the journal \*Science\*](#) described the gut microbiome of the Hadza people, hunter-gatherers in Tanzania, as more diverse than those seen in Western societies. The Hadza eat as our ancestors did — relying on foods found in the forest, such as wild berries, honey, fiber-packed legumes and fruits, and fresh game.

Although certain bacteria found in the Hadza's microbiome would shift depending on what foods they ate during their dry and wet seasons, these same bacteria weren't found in people who ate Western diets.

"Many types of bacteria in the gut that depend on a diverse diet disappear with chronic Western diet consumption," says Chang. "The gut microbiome is absolutely essential for health and when compromised can cause disease."

## The Western Diet Puts a Strain on the Immune System

From infancy, a healthy balance of microbes in the gut trains our immune system to know the difference between the good bacteria and the bad. When the bacterial environment in the gut becomes unbalanced, say from an overgrowth or elimination of certain bacteria, this can trigger an inflammatory response, which is the body's way of fighting off bacteria it considers a threat.

This puts the body in a state of chronic, low-grade inflammation, where it continually perceives certain stimuli as a threat. While some threats may be real, others may not be, causing the body to mistakenly attack its own internal organs, tissues and cells, causing autoimmune disease.

Whether an imbalance in the gut microbiome is the direct cause of Crohn's disease and other autoimmune diseases has yet to be proved, but [evidence is mounting in that direction](#). Indeed, a [study published in November 2017 in \*Science Translational Medicine\*](#) suggests that manipulating the microbiome by removing part of the "bad" bacteria and then reintroducing "good" bacteria has potential as a treatment for autoimmune diseases like Crohn's.

In the meantime, changing your diet may be one tangible way to reduce chronic inflammation, suggests [Robin Foroutan, RDN](#), a nutritionist and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

"What's going on in your gut dictates what goes on in your body as a whole — it's critically important to take good care of that internal garden by feeding gut bacteria the right foods," she says.

## Changing Your Lifestyle Is Key to Improving Gut Health

Even though [medical research](#) has shown that adults with common chronic conditions who eat healthier and lead an active lifestyle feel better, nearly three-fourths of Americans still aren't eating enough vegetables, fruits, dairy, and healthy oils, according to the [2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). That means we're still not improving our eating habits.

"We have to make better food choices, and that's not easy," says Chang. "People must understand that living a healthier lifestyle is best in the long-term."

Here's what you can do:

**Eat less salt and sugar.** Currently, about 9 out of 10 Americans consume more than the daily recommended amount of sodium, which is equal to a teaspoon of salt, reports the [CDC](#). The same goes for [sugar](#), where the average American consumes 19.5 teaspoons every day, when the recommended amount is no more than 6 teaspoons per day for women and 9 teaspoons for men.

**Keep your gut healthy with more plant-based foods.** That means more vegetables and fruit, which are [high in fiber](#), more herbs and spices, more legumes, and choose whole grains instead of refined grains.

**Replace bad fat with healthy fat.** Eat moderate amounts of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, found in foods such as salmon, and [oils from plants](#) including canola, corn, olive, peanut, and sunflower, as well as some nuts and seeds.

**Choose the right kinds of processed foods.** Not all [processed foods](#) are unhealthy. Even whole foods such as fresh vegetables and fruits have to be processed before they make it to supermarket shelves. Certain foods that are minimally processed and contain an ample amount of nutrients include:

Canned beans

Frozen fruits and vegetables

Whole-grain pasta

Nut butters and packaged nuts

Yogurt

Hummus

Canned and frozen fish

**Start teaching healthy eating habits early.** Train your kids to eat healthy and model that behavior yourself, suggests Myles. “Just like we don’t want people to smoke around our kids, we should apply that same attitude with unhealthy foods,” he says. “Treat unhealthy food like it’s a cigarette.”

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