

Is the Paleo Diet the Best Diet for Humans?

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Abstract

Is the Paleo diet the best diet for humans? This fad diet that enforces eating the same foods caveman ate 30,000 years ago has been popping up on social media and recruiting people to its lifestyle. Many experiments and studies have been dedicated to see whether going paleo and eating strict basic foods has better benefits than the classic healthier diet and exercise.

## Introduction

Today, around 160 million Americans are obese. Nearly 75% of men and 60% of women are obese or overweight (Murray, C. J., M. N., & Mokdad, A., 2018,). What is causing these

shocking numbers? One possible explanation is simply that Americans eat too much fast food, and therefore are unhealthy. However, the reality may be more complex than that. One theory suggests that genetics play an important role in the way our bodies process the foods that we eat. Diets such as the keto diet, the whole 30 diet, and the Paleo diet have been invented in an attempt to counteract this issue. These diets have become commercialized and turned mainstream after popping up on social media and many entertainment sources. There have even been jokes floating around the internet about the annoyances of people on these diets asking if there is gluten in the meal they're about to order. Surprisingly this joke is not too far off the purpose behind one of these diets. If one looks back into history, at the point when cavemen ruled the earth, we can see that there was no gluten present. Nor was there dairy, wheat, bread, or the most rarely found in nature, french fries. The Paleo diet is based off the theory that humans humans have not evolved enough in the past 30,000 years to process the foods that we eat ever since farming was incorporated. While in theory this diet is probably what's best for the human metabolism, it's not practical for the average working American due to expenses, high maintenance, and the possibility that the scientific theory of evolution behind the diet are not true.

## Paleo Theory

One reason many people go on the Paleo Diet is due to a disproved theory that states that the human body has not evolved enough to process the foods that are eaten today. The Paleo Diet is based off of the hunter-gatherer method used to eat over 30,000 years ago. Humans were always on the move searching for their next meal, and until they discovered farming their only source of foods were the animals around them that they could kill, or the plants around them that

they identified as edible. As shown by Mayo Clinic, the foods that are allowed are as follows: lean meats, fish, shellfish, eggs, nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetables, olive oil, coconut oil, and honey(Mayo Clinic, 2017). Foods that are not allowed are: whole grains, cereals, refined grains and sugars, dairy products, white potatoes, legumes, alcohol, coffee, salt, refined vegetable oils, and most processed foods. The hypothesis behind this diet claims that farming introduced new food groups into our systems that our bodies weren't capable of breaking down yet. The relatively recent addition of dairy, grains, and legumes outpaced our metabolism which in turn allowed weight gain and other health related issues to become prevalent. This mismatch between the human body's metabolism and its ability to adapt to the post-farming food is called the discordance hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that the human body lacks the appropriate amount of enzymes to break down dietary starches. According to Mayo Clinic, however, "Genetic research has shown that notable evolutionary changes continued after the Paleolithic era, including diet-related changes, such as an increase in the number of genes related to the breakdown of dietary starches."(Mayo Clinic,2017) . Although there are other benefits to this diet, the theory that the human body hasn't evolved to digest the dietary starches cannot be added to this list.

### Practicality

Not only does the diet not complete its scientific theory, but the Paleo Diet also is not practical for the average American . Paleo requires a lot of practice and patience to be able to get the most out of the diet as possible. Proper research always needs to be done before making any type of lifestyle changes. There's also the matter with restocking the pantry with acceptable food

which quickly becomes expensive. Most people already face the trouble of finding the time with their busy schedules to fit in spending time with friends and family, let alone taking the time to plan out every meal and cook most nights. Many of these diets like the paleo diet are endorsed by people on social media whose job is to promote this lifestyle. This side effect of social media is showing unattainable and unrealistic ways of living. A common misconception is that in order to be at peak health one must follow the latest celebrity, fitness model, or health guru on youtube, which is not true. Everyone's body functions differently on different substances and nutrients. Lactose intolerant people, for example, need to stay away from dairy products in order to avoid discomfort. Someone without lactose intolerance wouldn't cut dairy out of their diet if they didn't need to. Just like someone who is healthy and functioning well wouldn't drastically change their diet if there was no need for it. A major change like this may result in nutrient and vitamin loss. Many people on paleo need to take supplements in order to fuel their body with the missing vitamins and nutrients they are missing from not eating from crucial food groups. Paleo does not fit everyone's dietician requirements, fit everyone's schedule, or fit everyone's budget, which means this a non standard diet that doesn't encompass all human needs.

## Research

The main reason Paleo is not the best diet for all humans is because the effects of Paleo are very similar to the effects of a balanced diet and regular exercise. A study was done by Harvard University: School of Public Health on the effects of Paleo and a balanced diet with exercise in sweden. A randomized controlled trial was conducted on 70 postmenopausal women

with obesity for 2 years. The women on Paleo were required to stick to the guidelines of getting 30% calories from protein, 40% calories from fat, and 30% from carbohydrates. The women in the balanced diet group, or more specifically the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations (NNR) group, were given less protein at 15% calories from protein, 25-30% calories from fat, and an increase to 55-60% calories from carbohydrates. The NNR group ate similarly to the Paleo group but with more low fat products and high fiber grains. After 2 years both groups lost a significant amount of weight and circumference around their midsections. The main difference between the two groups is at 6 months the Paleo group had the most weight loss, but the sides changed at 24 months where the NNR group took the lead. Another difference was that the subjects in the Paleo group experienced a greater triglyceride decrease during both the 6 month check in and the 24 month check in. The results show that although Paleo works faster in the beginning, both groups will experience the same benefits in the long run (Harvard School of Health,2018).

## Counter Argument

Following the Paleo Diet does have health benefits. The Mayo Clinic states that this diet improves weight loss, glucose tolerance, blood pressure control, triglyceride levels, and appetite management. This diet also promotes a healthier lifestyle since it emphasizes cooking and working out. This diet can be beneficial if followed through correctly by tracking macros and taking supplements to replenish nutrients lost through the exclusion of certain foods. The claim about our bodies not being able to process new dietary starches may be false, but there is a hint of truth to this concept. Humans now are eating more processed foods which contain unnatural ingredients that are not good for our bodies whatsoever. Take sugar for instance. Sugar is a naturally occurring substance that can be found in fruits and vegetables. Eating these foods, in

moderation, are healthy for you because along with this sugar come fiber, calcium, and protein. According to Harvard University “School of Public Health” the problem is that this sugar has been taken into a concentrated form and put into processed foods to enhance the taste and our bodies simply cannot process this sugar. The reasoning behind the restriction of sugar in Paleo shows this, and goes back to the idea that there are foods out there that our bodies are simply just not genetically designed to digest. The solution to this is simple, cut out all those processed foods that contain these sugars. Cutting out processed foods is half the battle with Paleo. Instead of cutting out other good whole foods like dairy and legumes, this new habit of getting rid of processed foods will boost the immune system and detoxify the body. Taking this even further, the Paleo Diet is not needed to make one healthy.

## Conclusion

A Paleo diet may be the best diet for human bodies, but unless the diet is followed through with correctly, it’s not the best diet for humans overall. Endorsements for this diet on social media and other sources give a false impression that this is how most people are supposed to live. The reality is most people can’t afford this way of life, nor do they have the time for it. Another major idea to remember is that everyone has a different genetic makeup that can determine which foods work with them and which foods don’t. Everyone’s body is made differently, which means Paleo may work for some but not all. A simple routine of eating right and exercising can go a long way and is more attainable, and can be modified to fit the most people. After all “everything in moderation” is the best policy.

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