Episode 3 of Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black

Understanding the Standard American Diet and its Impact

So, what's your favorite food? A good old ham and cheese sandwich. What's your favorite food? Doritos. What's your favorite food? Cheese pizza. Cheese pizza? Yeah. What's your favorite food? Chicken fried chicken with some green beans and a burger on the side. What's your favorite food? Broccoli, carrots, and tomatoes.You win the prize! Good job!

Welcome to Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black, where we discuss plant-based nutrition for the whole family. This podcast is all about supporting families in their efforts to give their children a solid foundation of healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime. I'm your host, Dr. Angela Black.

I'm a board-certified pediatrician with over 20 years of experience. Over the course of my career, I've witnessed the rise of issues like high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and even fatty liver disease in kids as young as 10. I'm passionate about using evidence-based guidelines to teach my patients and their parents how to prevent chronic diseases for a lifetime of health.

I hope you find this podcast to be informative. And empowering for more episodes or if you would like more information about child nutrition and feeding, please visit www.eatgreenswithdrblack.com.

So, I talk to people in the office about nutrition and everybody knows the difference between a healthy diet and an unhealthy diet. I don't have to tell you that. Candy corn is less healthy than actual corn. Everybody knows this. So why am I dedicating an entire podcast episode to talking about the definition of an unhealthy diet?

This, I'm not going to tell you anything in this podcast that you don't already know. There's no big reveal. You know, the, I was tempted to do a click-baity kind of title for this episode, like the hidden secrets of the standard American diet and what it's doing to you. Or like, we all know, we know that we eat too much junk food.

We know that we don't eat enough. Fruits and vegetables. This is not a big secret. And I'm not going to tell you any great life changing information here today. So why, why am I dedicating an entire episode, just to this topic of saying, you know, the here's what we're eating, collectively, in the United States in the West in Western developed countries.

And Here's what we really ought to be eating. Why would I spend time doing that and telling you what you really already know? And the answer lies in my experiences in the office when I see, uh, kids for their checkups and I'm talking to families about how

they're feeding their kids, how they're doing, and they'll tell me, say, for example, you know, what they're sending in the lunchbox to school and it's all Lunchables and chips and other snacks - and you know, maybe they throw a few carrot sticks in there or some apple slices, but the apple slices usually come with the caramel to dip in and then we talk about you know, what are they doing at home? How often are they going they're eating fast food several times a week, but they'll tell me like oh, we don't eat that much fast food, you know only two or three times a week because when we have soccer practice or whatever to go to You know, we just don't have time to cook at home every day.

So, we're, but we're only doing it this many times a week, or we're doing a really good job limiting soda. We only let them have one soda a day. So, there's, there is a disconnect. There's a disconnect between what we know. is really the ideal diet and what we're actually really doing in practice, and it is impacting our health.

And so, I, I want to just start, you know, we're early in this podcast journey. I'm, I'm just developing the Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black podcast. And so, I want to start with the foundation, the basics. And so, I'm going to do it as a two-part episode. First, we're going to talk about What the standard American diet or the standard Western diet looks like I'm going to talk a little bit about the guidelines that are out There and then I'm going to review and then in the second episode to keep this from being you know Some mega three hour long episode that nobody wants to listen to in part two Then I'm going to lay out the definitions, like what is a healthy diet?

How, what does it look like? And so, we're going to start with what we're doing. Then we're going to go on to the gold standard of where we really should strive to be. And then as the podcast progresses over time, we're going to talk about Ways to move from where we are to where we want to be, where we are in terms of our health and our diet and what changes can we make?

How can we make this accessible to people so that they can put these changes in place and move in the direction of greater health, move towards incorporating more of those foods that you already know are healthy? into your diet, into your family's diet, your children's diet, in a way that makes sense, in a way that people can actually put into practice without feeling like they have just had to give up everything in life that they love, that it's a punishment, you know, we never want it to be like that.

We really want this to be accessible. When a patient comes to see me in the office, we're going to sit down and talk about their symptoms and I'm going to make a diagnosis. So, this podcast today is what are the symptoms that we're experiencing culturally and individually in terms of our, our diet, and I'm going to make a diagnosis.

And then the next thing I do in the office with a patient visit is we talk about the treatment. You know, what can we do to get better? How can we cure this disease?

Some things can be cured very easily. One quick course of medication and you're cured. Other things aren't like that. Other things take more time.

They take a step wise intervention. We have to go slowly and move through the process. And maybe we'll get all the way to a cure, and maybe we won't, but at least we can start that process, start that journey. So that's where we're going today. This episode is talking about the symptoms, making a diagnosis.

Part two is going to be talking about the treatment, the cure. And then as we move through this podcast journey, we're going to take the steps that we need to, to get there. How can we put these changes in place in a meaningful way, in an accessible way that lots of people can do and benefit from? Even if we don't get a 100 percent cure, we're at least going to feel better.

We're going to make better choices and we're going to find ways to do that.

As a reminder, this podcast provides general health information about nutrition and feeding of infants and children and is meant for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the important relationship between a parent, child, and pediatrician. If you have concerns about your child's nutrition, health, or growth, please consult your doctor.

Welcome to episode three of Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black. So, to get started, let's just talk a little bit about what the standard American or standard Western diet is. About every five years, the USDA and Department of Health and Human Services put out a 100 plus page document called the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

There's a link to it in the show notes on the website, www. eatgreenswithdrblack. It really does have a lot of good information about what we should be eating. But here's the thing. According to the report, only about 10 percent of Americans are following the recommendations. Only about 10 percent of adults get the appropriate amount of vegetables per day.

Fewer than 20 percent eat enough fruit, and less than 5 percent of adults in the United States eat enough whole grains. Let me throw out a few more statistics. 60 percent of kids drink at least one sugary drink every day. We're talking about juice, soda, and other sugar added beverages. The standard American diet involves a disproportionate reliance on convenience foods and processed foods.

Let's face it, we're in a hurry. We don't have time to slow down. We need fast, easy, and portable food here in the, in the West. Too many of our calories come from things like refined flour, added sugar, unhealthy fats, and also all the... Artificial additives that get put into foods. There's a distinct lack of variety in the nutrient dense foods.

Things like fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes. In fact, when I talk to kids in the office and ask them what they like to eat, for many of them the only two vegetables they'll touch is corn and green beans. Everything else is considered gross. So, what's the problem? I mean, what happens if we eat too many processed foods or not enough fresh fruits and veggies?

Why is this a big deal? Despite the fact that pharmaceutical companies are churning out numerous, brand-new medications every year, heart disease remains the number one killer in the United States and many other countries. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, someone dies in the United States from heart disease every 33 seconds and heart disease costs us over 200 billion dollars every year. A report just recently released in September of 2023 indicated that one in four, that's 25 percent of Americans will develop heart failure in their lifetime and the rates are rising. You may have heard a recent report on CNN that the World Stroke Organization, a Lancet Neurology Commission, predicts that the number of stroke related deaths is expected to jump 50 percent in the next 30 years.

That's from the current rate of 6. 6 million deaths per year to 9. 7 million deaths in 2050. Stroke is currently the second leading cause of death worldwide. Type 2 diabetes used to be called adult onset. When I started training, we still called it adult-onset diabetes. But now, over 40, 000 children and teens are diagnosed with it around the world every year.

A third of adults have prediabetes, and 80 percent of them don't even know they have it. And the number of adults who are diagnosed with Full blown diabetes has nearly doubled in the last two decades. Over 40 percent of adults and 20 percent of children are obese, with an increase of over 10 percent in the first 20 years of this century alone.

The rates of mental health disorders like depression and anxiety are on the rise, and even overall brain health has been negatively influenced. Things like memory issues and Alzheimer's rates are increasing.

So, let's throw out some definitions. What do I mean by processed foods? When I get lab results and I sit down with a family in the office to talk about their child's cholesterol or triglyceride level, I will tell them that they need to cut back on processed foods. And I'll tell you, I get this sort of blank stare, especially from the kids, but also sometimes from the parents.

What does that mean? Processed foods. Let's talk about it a little bit. Processing is anything we do to alter a food from its natural state. Things like chopping, grinding, cooking, chewing. Now, of course, some degree of processing is necessary. You're not going to go out in a field and chew on a stock of wheat, and you need to cook your meat to kill the E.coli, or your chicken to kill the salmonella. Without processing, we all would have died of malnutrition or food poisoning a long time ago. You have to grind, chop,

and cook many foods to get the nutritional benefits. So, not all processing is bad, but there's processing, and then there's processing, right?

Let's talk about the difference between minimally processed food and ultra-processed food. There are very few people left on the planet who are actually out hunting and gathering their food. I mean, there are still some people farming who have extensive land and backyard gardens and raise their own animals for food, but most of us are going to go get our food from the store.

So, we need ways to keep food fresh as it travels from the farm to the grocery store and then to our homes. It makes sense. Things like freezing and canning, these are both forms of processing, and they're needed and they're beneficial. Back before we had refrigeration and canning many people, especially those that lived in places with a harsh climate would suffer from nutritional deficiencies.

Even today, there are lots of places that don't have ready access to farmer's markets. I mean, this last summer here in Texas, we hit. At or above a hundred from about, I don't know, mid-June all the way through the end of September. My little, tiny backyard garden was downright crispy. So, it's great to have access to foods that are stable enough to be shipped from places where they're grown.

In some cases, these frozen and canned foods may even be the better choice than what you're finding in the produce section because they were harvested and packaged at their peak of freshness. Also, they're more affordable, which is a great hack for saving money on the grocery bill. So, we move from minimally processed foods, which is doing the things we have to do to be able to benefit from the nutrients to keep them fresh.

And then on the other end of the spectrum we have ultra-processed foods. Ultra-processed foods have been changed to the point that they are unrecognizable as something that you might find in nature, right? They're gonna come in a box or a package. They have a really long list of ingredients, most of which you can't pronounce.

And you can't really tell what's in them just by looking. read that list of ingredients. If you were to try to recreate them, you would need a laboratory. It's not something that you could just throw together in your kitchen from readily available ingredients. When scientists have looked at global trends in food availability and disease rates around the world, they've noticed something interesting.

In countries where ultra-processed foods were historically not available, they will see the rates of things like obesity, heart disease, and a variety of cancers, and autoimmune disease start to rise as the processed foods and other types of foods that are more common in developed countries start creeping in, and the ultra-processed foods become more abundant.

A meta-analysis is a study where scientists review all the published studies on a subject, and then they compare the findings across those studies to try to determine how strong the evidence is. One meta-analysis found that the highest ultraprocessed food consumption was consistently associated with Increased risks of heart disease, stroke, depression, and all-cause mortality, meaning people just died earlier.

I'll just remind you that you can find links to most of the information I'm talking about on the website if you're the kind of science nerd that wants to actually look at the evidence. Ultraprocessed foods are pro inflammatory, and they damage the gut microbiome. But one thing you'll notice when you're eating these foods is that it is really difficult to stop eating them.

And that's not on accident. Food companies will deliberately develop these foods to hit something called a bliss point. So, the food scientists test the foods. For their flavor, how they feel in the mouth, their crunch factor, how much salt and oil and sugar is in them. And they'll manipulate those levels until when you take a bite, it's going to release a flood of dopamine right into the brain.

It's sort of like the crack cocaine of foods, right? This is no accident. Unfortunately, broccoli, spinach, things like that don't have the same effect on your brain. Which is why we're naturally, especially children or when we're in the habit of eating these foods. We're naturally going to reach for them, and we're going to keep eating them.

That's why you can sit down and eat an entire bag of chips, but, you know, you're not going to sit down and eat a huge bag of broccoli. They're designed to make you not feel full, and you'll notice if you're not paying close attention. If you just have that bag right there, before you know it, the entire bag is gone and you still feel hungry, you're still craving more.

And so, this is a deliberate thing that the food companies do to make their products more desirable and to keep you going back to buy more in ever and ever larger quantities. Alright, so are you with me so far? We've got our patient, the United States population, in the exam room, and we're trying to sort out what's ailing them, right?

Why is the blood pressure up? Why is the blood sugar up? What's causing that chest pain, reflux symptoms, the obstructive sleep apnea? So, we've identified that we are eating Way too many ultra-processed foods, and not nearly enough fruits, grains, and vegetables. But what about things like meat and dairy? I mean, those are whole foods, right?

Let me throw a few more numbers at you. The average American eats 51 pounds of beef, 100 pounds of chicken, and 51 pounds of pork per year. Europeans eat the most cheese at 46 pounds per year and in the U. S. we consume 39 pounds of cheese per

year. Interestingly, Mexicans only eat about 10 pounds of cheese per year, which came as a big surprise to me.

Living in Texas, every time I go to a Mexican restaurant, there's cheese all over the place. So, it just goes to show you how what people are eating with their native ancestral diets and what we're doing in the United States are completely different. When you start westernizing these traditional diets, you're starting to see things creep in that weren't traditionally there.

And last, here in the United States, we tend to eat approximately 280 eggs per year. That's a lot of omelets. So why might this be a problem? Don't we need meat and dairy for strong muscles and bones? Doesn't milk do a body good? Let's start with red meat. It's pretty well established that the cattle industry with its concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, is one of the leading contributors to climate change due to deforestation, Excessive greenhouse gas emissions and the heavy use of water resources.

I'm not going to talk a lot about the impact on the environment of the cattle and dairy industries. There's lots of information out there for you. If you want it, it may be a topic of a future, a future podcast episode, but for now, I'm just going to leave it at that. There is very strong evidence in the literature that red meat increases the risk for heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and premature death, especially processed meats.

Processed meats are things like bacon, hot dogs, sausage, deli meats, all the pepperoni we put on our pizza every year. The World Health Organization has classified processed meats as a class one carcinogen. That means that the evidence supporting that they cause cancer is equally strong as the evidence that cigarettes cause lung cancer.

Processed meats are especially associated with colorectal cancer. In one study, even one additional serving per day of unprocessed red meat raised the risk of total mortality by 13 percent, and an extra serving of processed red meat raised it by 20 percent. That total mortality, that's the risk of premature death.

A lot of people talk about meat as being a good source of iron, and heme iron is the type of iron that's found in muscle and blood. And it is true that meat does have a lot of the heme iron, and it's well absorbed, and it's even used more readily by humans. If you have severe anemia, getting your iron from meat might be a good idea.

But plant-based foods also have a type of iron, it's called non heme iron, and we can get everything we need for our daily iron intake from a plant-based food without that increased risk of cancer, stroke, heart disease, metabolic syndrome. What about milk and cheese? Milk and cheese are both high in saturated fat.

Saturated fat is the kind of fat that's solid at room temperature. Think, uh, if you cook bacon and then let the grease in the pan cool off, it's going to become solid. That's the saturated fat. Saturated fat in particular is associated with heart disease, it raises your cholesterol levels, and it raises your risks for diabetes.

Additionally, in the dairy industry, the cows are treated with antibiotics, and this is a huge contributor to antibiotic resistance. It's getting harder and harder to treat bacterial illness because the bacteria are resistant to the medications that we have to treat them, and those antibiotics used in the dairy industry are a well-documented factor in contributing to that rise of resistance.

When I'm in the office talking to parents, the number one reason they think that their kids need to drink lots of milk is because it has that calcium and that it's good for your bone health. But some major studies have really called that belief into question. For example, the Harvard Nurses' Health Study, which occurred over a 12-year period and evaluated over 75, 000 middle aged women, found that those who consumed the most calcium from dairy foods actually broke More bones than those who rarely drink milk.

Other studies have documented that the countries with the highest dairy intake actually have the highest rates of osteoporosis. So, this idea that the calcium in milk and cheese is good for our health is really in question with the current literature and definitely needs more study. I do just want to clarify, dietary calcium is absolutely necessary for bone health, especially during periods of rapid growth like adolescence.

But more research needs to be done to determine why increased dairy intake seems to be associated with worse overall bone health. Moving on to eggs, uh, again, definitely some health benefits to infrequent egg consumption. They are high in protein to be sure, but men who eat one or more eggs per day have been shown to have increased risks of heart failure.

And then, of course, the mass factory farming of chickens is associated with high levels of pollution and spread of disease, not to mention how cruel it is to the chickens in question. Now, for me, fish, and seafood. Were the most challenging foods to give up when I went to a 100 percent plant-based diet to be honest I'm complete transparency every once in a while.

I still have some sushi or seafood gumbo I just have it way less than I used to, so I don't want anybody to accuse me of being dishonest but there are definite health risks. I mean, you'll hear about the, about things, fatty fish, like salmon being a good source of omega 3 fatty acids, which we do need.

They're essential fatty acids that we can't make ourselves. Uh, they are found in plenty of plant-based products though. But what we know is those larger fish like salmon that have the good fats also concentrate pollutants from the water in their flesh. So, when

you eat that salmon, you're getting a fair amount of things like mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls.

These are chemical pollutants in the water. They're toxic to your brain and nervous system. They can affect the development of fetuses and young children, and they may even raise cancer risks. And then going back to the environmental impacts. Unsafe, large scale fish farming will destroy the natural aquatic habitats and releases a lot of pollution into the water.

So, let's wrap up with part one of this two-part series. Today we defined what the standard American diet is, and we talked about how, here in the West, we're choosing these processed convenience foods, uh, over the more nutrient dense fruits, vegetables, and grains. The influence of the Standard American Diet on health statistics is really undeniable.

Numerous studies have linked this dietary pattern to a range of chronic diseases, including obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer. Additionally, things like mental health disorders, depression, anxiety, other brain disorders like memory problems and Alzheimer's disease have been associated with higher intakes of processed foods in the standard American diet.

We talked a little bit about the difference between minimally and ultra-processed foods. And, you know, we reviewed some ways, some of the ways that these ultra-processed foods harm our health and the environment. In part two, we're going to move from making the diagnosis to prescribing the treatment. So, we're going to talk about what a whole food plant-based diet is.

And I'm going to count down the top 10 reasons why you might want to consider changing from the standard American diet over more towards the whole food plant-based diet. And I'm also going to offer some tips on how to start making those changes. Even small changes can have a big impact on your overall health.

So. Please join me for the next episode of Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black. Parenting is a journey that comes with many challenges, but also much joy. I hope this podcast empowers you to set your family on the path to lifelong health. If you enjoyed this podcast, please hit the subscribe button so you never miss an episode.

For more helpful information about plant-based nutrition for families and children, check out the show website, www. eatgreenswithdrblack. com. And don't forget to eat your greens.