

mascha davis

FOOD MYTHS:

let's seek the truth.





Foreword from the Editor.

Here in the U.S., many of us are fortunate enough to have access to a variety of nourishing foods to help us maintain a healthy lifestyle. Despite the luxury of this access, it's ironic that our society as a whole tends to seek out polarizing trends that go against the fundamentals of healthy eating.

Decades of studies show that an established consensus exists: a balanced, nutrient-rich diet is the key to good health. However, the latest fads and diet trends almost always lean towards either the overconsumption or elimination of specific foods.

How is that balanced at all? And why do we complicate matters when, in fact, it all comes down to our most basic need to nourish ourselves?

Let's call it for what it is: first world problems in a society which often forgets how privileged we are relative to other parts of the world.

Through her humanitarian work in Africa, Mascha Davis, MPH, RDN understood firsthand what this all means. Over a period of five years, Mascha lived and worked in five different African countries. Starting with a hospital in the jungles of Gabon, to helping communities in Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan and Chad improve food security and prevent malnutrition, she gained a renewed sense of appreciation and perspective: that eating to live is the common thread that ties us all together, no matter where we are in the world.

It is time we recognize that the act of nourishing ourselves must be done with a socially-conscious mind...so that we may remain grateful for the privileges we have.

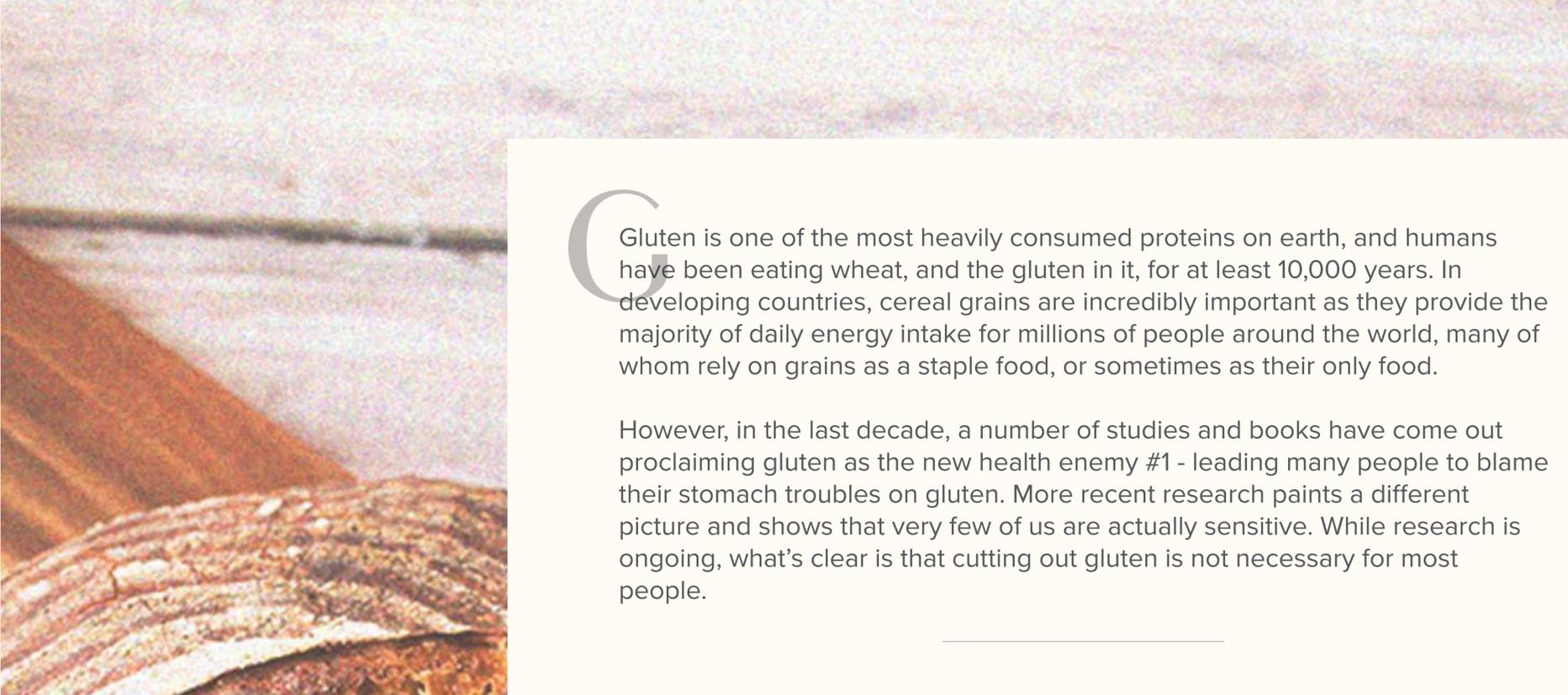
Now, let's seek the truth with Mascha about these 5 popular food myths as a preview of our upcoming book, and gain a global perspective on what healthy eating is truly about.

Monica Mo
WellSeek Founder & Editor

FOOD MYTH ONE:

GLUTEN

Gluten has become the latest health buzzword that is seemingly everywhere. And there are a lot of us – up to 30% of Americans – who believe they should be eating less gluten, a protein found in some grains such as wheat, barley and rye.



Gluten is one of the most heavily consumed proteins on earth, and humans have been eating wheat, and the gluten in it, for at least 10,000 years. In developing countries, cereal grains are incredibly important as they provide the majority of daily energy intake for millions of people around the world, many of whom rely on grains as a staple food, or sometimes as their only food.

However, in the last decade, a number of studies and books have come out proclaiming gluten as the new health enemy #1 - leading many people to blame their stomach troubles on gluten. More recent research paints a different picture and shows that very few of us are actually sensitive. While research is ongoing, what's clear is that cutting out gluten is not necessary for most people.

CELIAC DISEASE

- which is an allergy to gluten - is a very real condition, and affects less than 1% of the U.S. population. Gluten sensitivity, on the other hand, is a relatively new diagnosis, with scientists estimating that between 0.5% – 6% of the U.S. population may have some degree of gluten sensitivity.



“ Studies have shown that gluten seemed to have zero measurable harmful effects in most individuals. ”

While some people who cut out gluten-containing foods claim to feel better, alternate reasons are due to the fact they may have:

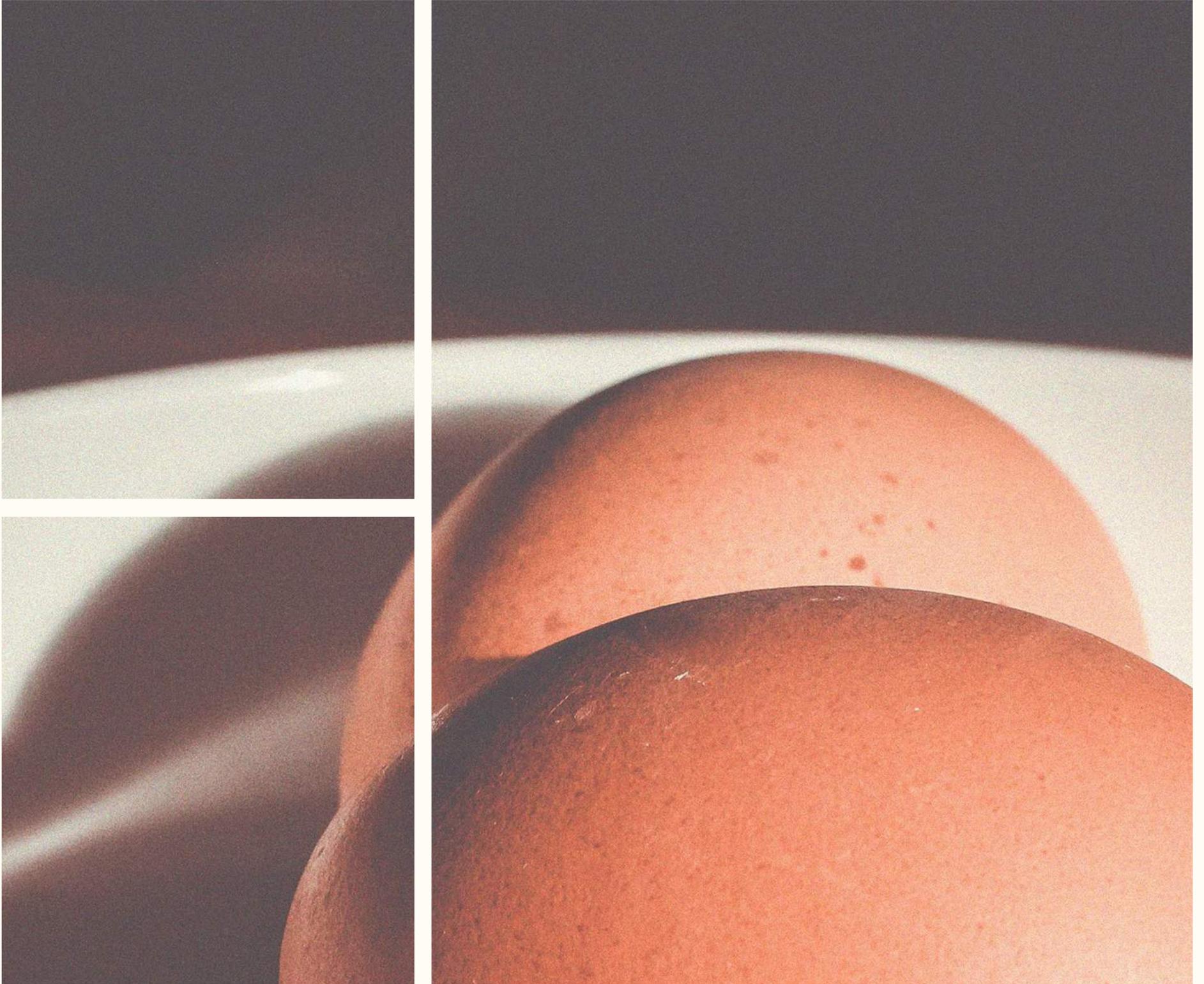
- Sensitivities or allergies to other compounds (like FODMAPs) or wheat.
- Reduced their processed foods intake (i.e. many grain products)
- Experienced a placebo-like effect.

For the majority of individuals, gluten is OK to eat! But if you insist on gluten-free, simply eliminating gluten can actually end up doing more harm than good. There are definitely ways to reduce or eliminate gluten and still be healthy. It's important to focus on balance and ensure that key nutrients (like fiber and the right amount of energy dense carbs) are not cut out along with gluten. For the small number of truly sensitive individuals who will benefit from gluten-free diets, consult with a Registered Dietitian (RD) to help you plan your meals and meet all of your nutrition needs!

FOOD MYTH TWO:

EGGS

Eggs have been villainized for decades due to their high cholesterol content, which was thought to contribute to heart disease risk. We now know that dietary cholesterol has little or no impact on total blood cholesterol and does little in raising heart disease risk, which is more attributed to saturated fat and refined carbohydrates. Nonetheless, the egg myth perpetuated since the 1950s is still a common misconception.



In reality, eggs are a critical staple across many cultures, providing high quality protein even to the lowest income families. A recent UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report states,

“In developing countries it is not often that a family can afford to kill a cow or even a goat for food, but eggs are small and frequently laid. They are also an easily prepared, easily digestible, protein-rich food suitable for children from the age of six months onward.”

But this isn't only true in places like Somalia and Sudan. It's just as relevant in the U.S.! Eggs are a fantastic source of protein, fat-soluble vitamins and powerful antioxidants. It's safe for most people to consume 1-2 eggs per day.



Did you know that 70-80% of the cholesterol in our bodies is made by our liver and small intestine, rather than ingested from the food we eat?

Dietary cholesterol has very little impact on increased cholesterol in the body, and eating egg yolks does not increase your cholesterol nearly as much as refined carbohydrates, saturated fats, and trans fats do.

That is why the most recent dietary guidelines and recommendations

(which are revised every five years) remove the previous daily cholesterol limit of 300 mg. Eggs contain very little saturated fat and no trans fats, making them a perfectly nutritious source of protein for healthy individuals.

However, those who have diabetes or existing heart disease are still cautioned to limit their egg consumption, especially if they are already consuming relatively high levels of saturated fat.

“ It gets a bad rap, but cholesterol is actually a wonderful nutrient that we all need ”

Cholesterol is an essential component of all cell membranes and is critical for producing hormones, like estrogen and testosterone and Vitamin D. It is when saturated fat and refined carbohydrates are increased together with cholesterol that this can promote inflammation and atherosclerosis – hardening of the arteries – and ultimately lead to a heart attack or stroke.

Foods high in antioxidants, such as blueberries, blackberries, acai and goji berries, are key in decreasing inflammation – thus promoting healthy arteries and a healthy heart.

Monounsaturated fats such as olive oil, avocado and nuts are healthy fats that help reduce inflammation and lower cholesterol levels. Another key nutrient to help lower ‘bad’ LDL cholesterol levels is fiber, which actually binds to cholesterol and helps excrete it from the body.

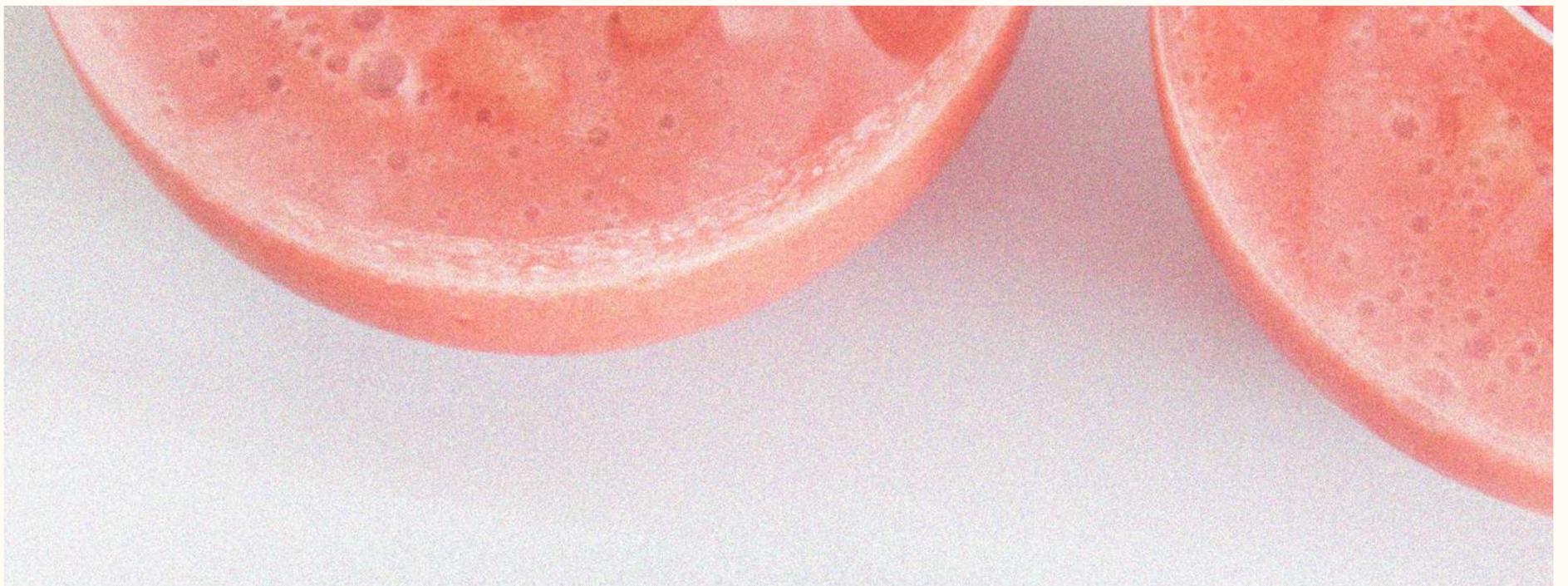
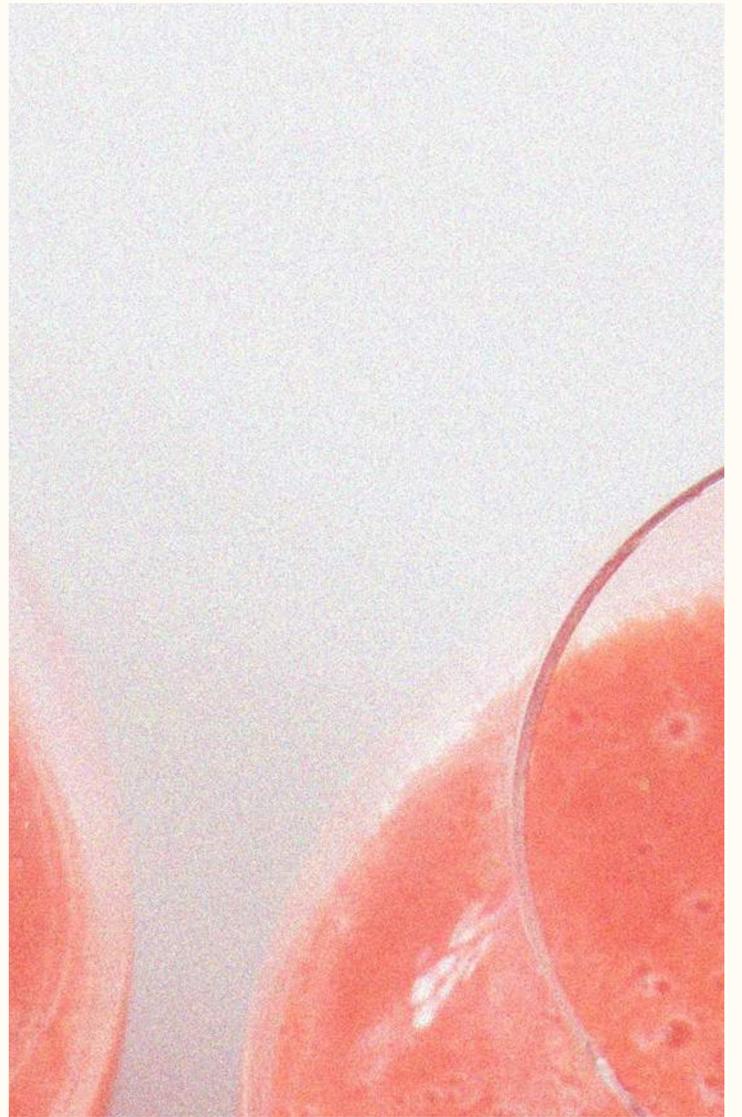
Sources of fiber include fresh fruits and vegetables, brown rice, oatmeal, quinoa, chia seeds, beans and legumes. There is definitely no shortage of foods that you can fill up on to combat heart disease!

FOOD MYTH THREE:

JUICING

With juice bars popping up everywhere, the concept of detoxing with a liquid diet has never been more mainstream. Many people believe that juicing is a way to detox, cleanse and purify the body, all while getting a nutrient boost. While there is nothing wrong with enjoying some freshly squeezed juice every once in awhile, the danger comes with the mistaken belief that going on a 'cleanse' and consuming numerous glasses of juice throughout the day is good for your body.

In fact, there is zero research or scientific papers that provide support to the idea that cleansing is happening from juicing. Our body already has a natural detox system: our liver and kidneys.



Did you know that fresh fruits and vegetables are considered a luxury in many parts of the world? They are highly resource-intensive to cultivate, which is why intake is lower in the least developed countries and conversely, highest in the most affluent.

The naturally-occurring fiber in fruits and vegetables (which a whopping 95% of Americans don't get enough of) should be treasured for its extraordinary properties, rather than stripping it away in a cold-pressed juice.

Fruits and vegetables are among the best sources of nutrients and antioxidants. Eating a primarily plant-based diet has been shown to have massive health benefits across the board. Getting fruits and veggies in any form will add some benefit, but keeping the whole food form with all the fiber really boosts its positive health impact.

While you can derive the same vitamins and minerals from juicing, these vitamins and minerals are no

more bioavailable in the juice than they are in the whole fruit or vegetable. In fact, there are phytonutrients inside insoluble fiber (the 'roughage' removed during juicing) that interact with vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, which can:

- Promote bowel regularity
- Lower cholesterol
- Stabilize blood sugars
- Help with weight management

“ Because insoluble fiber is lost in the juicing process and fruit juice contains a high amount of sugar , blood sugar levels spike more quickly and trigger an insulin response. ”

If you really want to drink your fruits and veggies, smoothies are a great way to get your nutrients because they actually retain their full nutritious benefits from blending the whole fruit or vegetable.

In fact, smoothies DO include some cleansing power because of all of the fiber that's contained in them!

If you love juice, you don't have to stop drinking it. Have 4 oz (or 1/2 cup) of fruit juice, or 6-8 oz if it's mostly green or vegetable juice since the sugar content is much lower.

Feel free to have that glass just in moderation!



FOOD MYTH FOUR:

SOY

In the last two decades, soy has become a mainstream alternative to animal-based protein products. With popularity comes scrutiny as growing fears are being incited by its critics. Much of the controversy and confusion is around soy isoflavones and their action in the body.

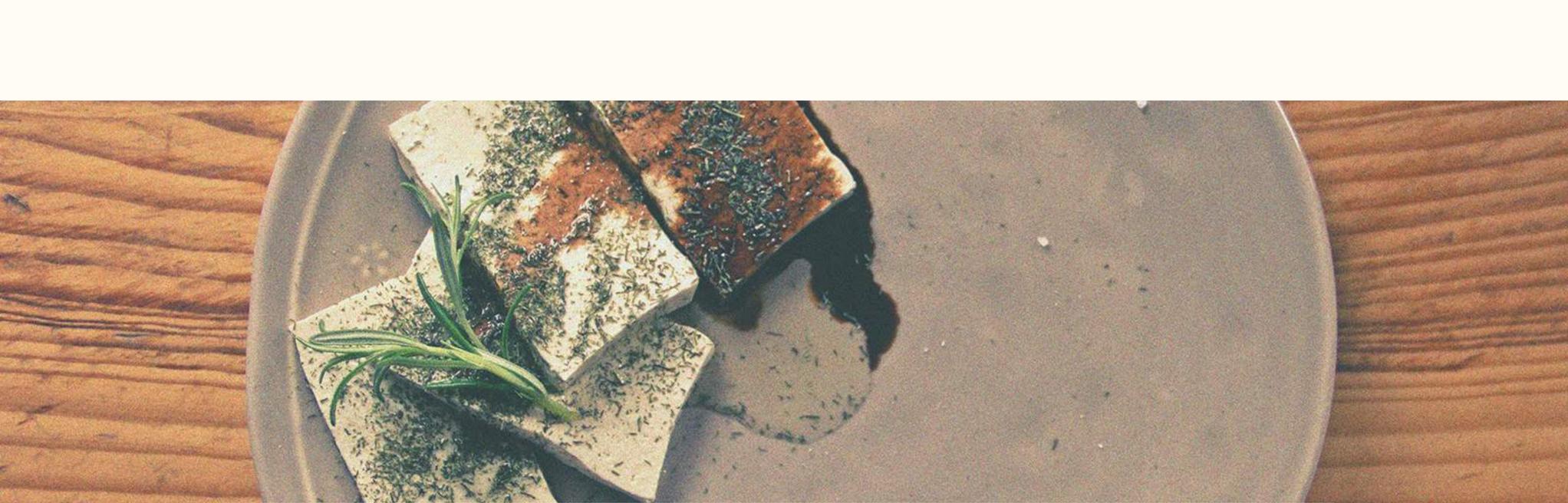
Some isoflavones, also called phytoestrogens or “plant estrogens”, have a similar chemical structure to estrogen. Because estrogen plays such a wide role in our biology, researchers have studied whether soy’s phytoestrogen compounds have similar effects.

Having been cultivated and consumed in China and Japan for over 1,000 years, soy is a legume that is a staple across many Asian cultures. Soy — both unfermented and fermented — continues to comprise a significant part of traditional Asian diets. Its popularity continues to grow because of its

excellent protein profile, palatability, and protective health properties demonstrated by soy-consuming populations. There is no reason why it can't be a part of American diets as well - whether vegan, vegetarian, omnivore or whatever else you choose to be.

Soy and its Phytoestrogen:





Breast cancer.

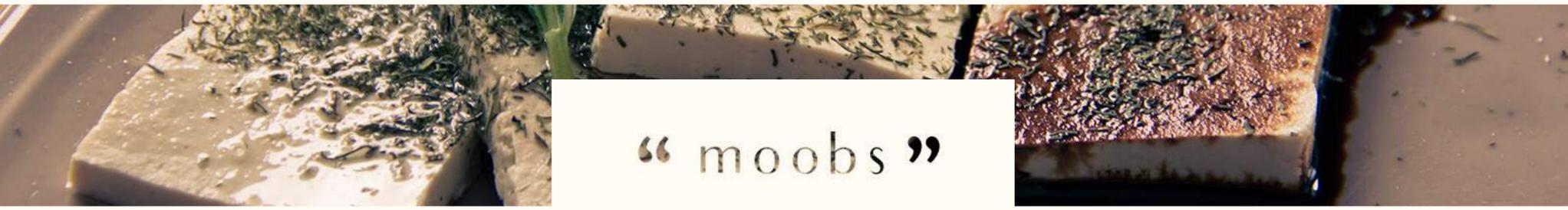
While human estrogen is linked to breast cancer-promoting effects, there is no evidence suggesting phytoestrogens cause the onset of breast cancer. In fact, studies have shown that women consuming moderate amounts of soy throughout their life actually have lower breast cancer risk than women who do not consume any.

Other large studies on Asian populations who consume 1 to 2 servings per day all found higher intakes of soy were actually associated with a reduced risk of cancer.

Menopause.

Since estrogen is given as a hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for menopausal women, popular belief holds that soy can be a natural alternative. In fact, the Women's Health Initiative has reported a decline in estrogen therapy usage in recent years, while seeing an increase of menopausal women consuming soy products.

However, limited studies using soy as an estrogen replacement make it difficult to conclude if there is truly an effect. Considering the conflicting results from a small number of studies, soy's efficacy in improving menopausal symptoms remains unclear.



“ moobs ”

Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of men who consume soy will not develop feminine features. In a 2010 review, researchers indicate there is no evidence that soy isoflavone exposure impacts circulating estrogen in men. At moderate amounts, soy has not been shown to cause feminine characteristics in men.

However, some studies show that a very small number of men with increased sensitivity, when consuming soy at extremely high amounts, (more than 12 servings a day) may go on to develop tender, enlarged breast tissue. Overall, these studies show that it's extremely rare for a typical male to suffer from 'feminization' effects. In fact, it is difficult for any typical

person to consume close to enough soy for that type of effect. What we know is that many misconceptions remain exaggerated myths. Most studies point to soy's positive benefits, whereas its negative effects are speculative at best.

Eating moderate amounts, such as one serving per day (equivalent to 1 cup of soy milk or ½ cup of tofu) make it an excellent part of a balanced diet and a wonderful protein alternative. It can help us decrease saturated fat and meat consumption that is linked to heart disease. This is undisputedly beneficial to our health, and the majority of Americans can benefit tremendously by making this simple swap.

FOOD MYTH FIVE:

SUGAR

Are all sugars made equal? There's a lot of confusion these days about different sugars or sweeteners. Some people say that agave is much better to use than honey. Others think maple syrup is superior to brown sugar. People looking to reduce their sugar intake are now turning to coconut sugar.

The negative impact of sugar overconsumption is the same any time it is consumed in excess, and is now truly a worldwide issue. High-sugar processed foods have become easily accessible and widespread, even in remote parts of the globe. I was surprised that I could buy Oreos in the jungles of Gabon and that even in small African villages, Coca Cola signs were ubiquitous. This has led to a “double burden” faced by many developing countries, with staggering rates of diet-related chronic diseases and obesity on top of the existing persistence of infectious diseases.

Sugar is not actually bad when consumed in moderation because it can give us quick energy. While sugars are a primary energy source for most cells in our body, it is when we consume them in excess that our blood sugar rises to unhealthy levels. Over time, this can increase risk for diabetes, inflammation, and cancer.



White Sugar.

The most common sugar consumed is sucrose, or white sugar, which is 50% fructose, 50% glucose. Sucrose digests rapidly, but has a relatively low glycemic index (GI) of 65 due to fructose, which produces a lower blood glucose response. Despite this lower response, fructose is by no means healthy and has been the subject of heavy scrutiny and debate in how it impacts health, particularly for the liver.

Often, consumers looking for alternative sweeteners have a misguided belief that they may be 'healthier'. Let's take a closer look at whether alternative sweeteners are truly better than white sugar.

Honey.

Honey has about 60 calories per tablespoon – a bit more than the 50 calories from white sugar. It is also slightly sweeter, so you may end up using less. While honey has been touted for its antibacterial and antifungal properties for centuries, sugar is still the predominant component in honey's composition. Honey is made up of 75% sugar, of which half is glucose and half is fructose.

Sounds pretty similar to white sugar still, right?

Agave.

Agave syrup is produced from a succulent related to cactus, called the agave plant. It has a runnier consistency than honey, with a sweet but relatively mild flavor. Even though it is less viscous, it still has the same number of calories per tablespoon as maple syrup and honey: 60.

You may have heard that agave has a lower glycemic index than sugar and contains beneficial sugars called fructans. This is true, but if we look further into the composition of agave syrup, it's clear that it's not actually 'healthier'. Agave still contains about half glucose and half fructose. The processing of agave nectar into its store-bought syrup form also breaks down those fructans into more...you guessed it, fructose.

Maple syrup.

Maple syrup is made from sap, the sugary circulating fluid of maple trees. And it's true, maple syrup does contain a decent amount of minerals like manganese and zinc. But keep in mind that it also contains a whole bunch of sugar. Maple syrup is about 2/3 sucrose (as in table sugar); therefore, 100 grams will supply ~67 grams of sugar.

Coconut sugar.

Do you recall that regular white sugar is sucrose (50% fructose, 50% glucose)? Despite coconut sugar having a lower GI of 35, coconut sugar is still made up of 70%-80% sucrose.

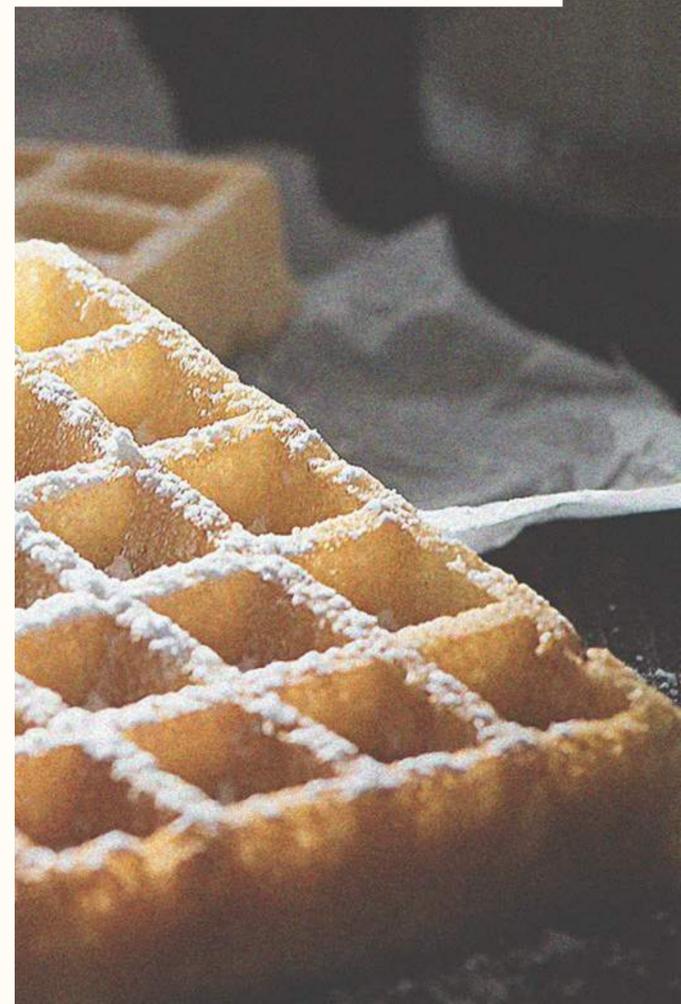
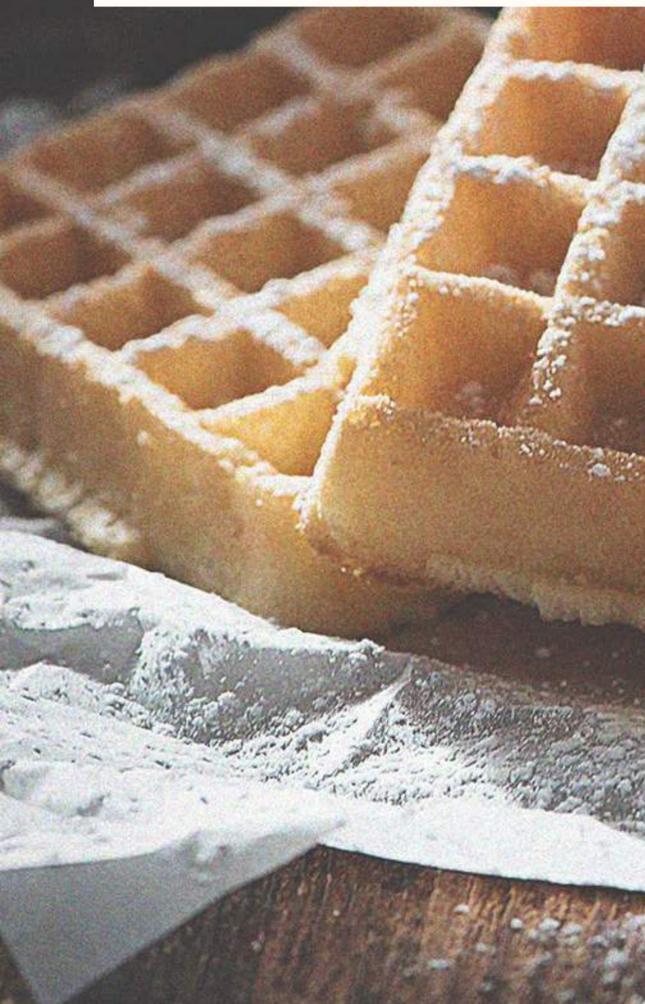
Because of this amount, coconut sugar supplies almost the same amount of fructose as regular sugar, gram for gram. It is very similar to regular table sugar, although the manufacturing process is more natural. It does also contain some trace amounts of nutrients. However, again, the nutrient amounts are negligible since no one consumes the cups of coconut sugar that would be required for a positive health impact from trace nutrients (at least we hope they don't!).

Brown sugar.

Did you know that brown sugar is just white sugar mixed with molasses? Brown sugar has a tiny amount of nutrients like potassium, magnesium and some B vitamins. However, the nutrient amount is so small that it is nearly negligible. Brown sugar also has nearly the same number of calories as white sugar: 16 kcals/tsp in brown vs. 15 kcals/tsp in white.

the sweet truth...

is that sugar is sugar. All sugars contribute calories without providing any significant nutrients and, as such, should be consumed in limited quantities. The good news is that you can feel free to pick the texture and taste of your sweetener, but know that in the end, it is just sugar as far as your health is concerned.



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