 <hr />A LONG time ago, a brilliant physician recommended bread to aid the digestive tract. He was Hippocrates &#65533; the father of medicine.

He must have recognised the nutritional value of stone-ground flour that was made into unleavened bread. That was the kind of bread used in biblical times.

Sadly, the bread of Hippocrates&#65533; time bears no resemblance to today&#65533;s commercial white bread, first developed just 100 years ago. Today&#65533;s bread is refined and stripped of all the goodness it should have. It has become smooth and soft, unlike the coarse and tough breads of ancient times.

To add insult to injury, modern breads are sweetened, coloured and flavoured. In short, modern breads are empty calories.

Two new studies

Indeed, the widespread consumption of white bread has not been good for humanity. In fact, two new studies show that a choice of white bread could make you fat and even diabetic. The research at the Cancer Council in Victoria, Australia, did not start out to study bread. The original scope was to examine associations between Type II diabetes risk and the intake of different kinds of food. The foods were evaluated using the Glycemic Index (GI).

The Glycemic index is a way to classify how foods affect blood sugar. Foods classified as low GI (most fruits and vegetables &#65533; stuff made by Mother Nature) prompt a slow increase in blood sugar levels, while high GI foods (processed baked goods and starchy foods &#65533; stuff made by man) produce a quick spike in blood sugar levels.

Blood sugar

A STEADY intake of high GI foods leads to high blood sugar. This causes a gradual insensitivity to insulin. That leads to Type II diabetes &#65533; sometimes called adult onset diabetes. The Australians studied the medical records and eating habits of more than 36,700 men and women over four years.

The subjects&#65533; ages ranged from 40 to 69 when the study began. None had been diagnosed with diabetes.

More than 360 cases of Type II diabetes were identified by the end of the study period. The data confirmed that a diet with a high GI index rating was associated with an elevated risk of diabetes.

Specifically, the researchers singled out white bread as the one food most strongly related to the development of diabetes.

White foods

PEOPLE who eat the most white bread &#65533; half of whom say they have it at least 17 times a week &#65533; are more than 30 per cent more likely to develop Type II diabetes.

Other foods that appear to increase diabetes risk include starchy foods and foods which, like white bread, encourage a spike in blood sugar, such as crackers, cookies, and cakes. These foods may increase diabetes risk by causing weight gain, which increases the risk of Type II diabetes.

The researchers wrote that diabetes risk might be reduced by cutting white bread products from the diet, and replacing them with breads that have lower GI ratings.

Genuine whole grain

SIMPLE, you&#65533;re probably saying, "I&#65533;ll just switch to brown or wholemeal bread."

There is a problem here. Many of the whole grain breads on the shelves consist of mostly white bread with a little colouring added to give them a whole grain look.

According to a recent study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, it is well worth your time to read nutrition panels carefully to make sure the bread you buy is genuinely whole grain.

A research team led by the Harvard School of Public Health used periodic questionnaires in a long-term study to follow the dietary habits of more than 27,000 men for eight years.

The subjects measured and reported body weight at the beginning and end of the study. Unlike the Australian study, this research specifically examined the intake of whole grain, bran and cereal fibre.

The Harvard team found that subjects who consumed the most whole grains tended to have the lowest weight gain.

This association held true even when added bran or fibre intakes fluctuated.

So

while it was not a surprise to learn that whole grains were a healthier choice than highly processed flour products, the researchers concluded that "additional components in whole grains may contribute to favourable metabolic alterations that may reduce long-term weight gain".

Other benefits

IN other words, the value of whole grain food may go well beyond the positive benefits of just good fibre intake. Hippocrates must be smiling in his grave.

Whole grain breads also contain enough fibre to inhibit blood sugar spikes. That is why whole grains tend to rate low on the Glycemic Index. Whole grains don't trigger carbohydrate cravings. Thus, you actually eat less and feel better.

On the other hand, high GI actually make you hungrier than foods with a low GI. You end up eating more. If the foods you are eating more of are high GI, you get caught in a vicious cycle that can only lead to weight gain and related complications.

The solution is to become aware of the GI value of the foods you eat. A website operated by the University of Sydney now makes that very easy to do. The site (glycemicindex.com) provides a database where you can search for the Glycemic Index of different types of food. The slight drawback for those of us is that the database is sometimes specific about brand names, which are mostly Australian and European. Nevertheless, it offers an excellent guide for low-GI dietary choices.

I call the low-GI foods slow carbs. They raise blood sugar slowly. They are an ideal follow-up or addition to any low carb weight loss diet. Sadly, nearly all the foods that we take are fast carbs – they cause your blood sugar to spike.

Despite the low GI, whole grains can present other problems. Some people have allergies. It can lead difficulties in digestion. The scientific documentation in this area continues to grow.

White rice

SO you might say that white bread is "pure, white and deadly". What about white rice? What about the white flour in our noodles, ketupat, pau, kueh teow, loh shee fan and roti chanai? Even healthful-looking capati often contains refined wheat flour.

Many of us take these foods more than 17 times a week. The Australian study pointed that those taking white bread 17 times or more a week had a 30 risk of increased diabetes. Logically, these foods can bust our waistlines and spike diabetes, too.

On The Net: Glycemic Index and Dietary Fiber and the Risk of Type 2 Diabetes" Diabetes Care, Vol 27, No 11, 11/27/04, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov, American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, ajcn.org

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