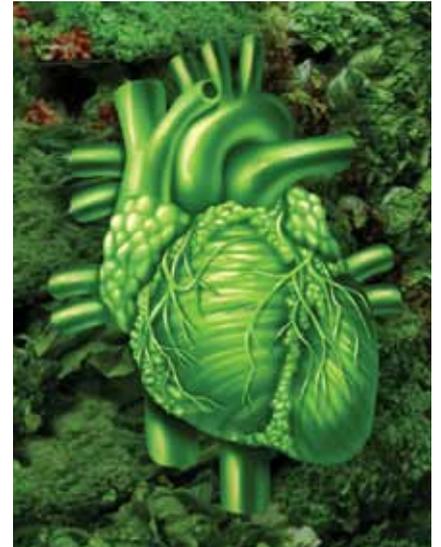


→ What's the right diet – Mediterranean, Paleo or vegetarian/vegan?

Three leading experts presenting their cases for their idea of the “right diet” proved one of the highlights of the annual Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM) Conference. The 2014 theme: Functional Perspectives on Food and Nutrition: The Ultimate Upstream Medicine. CAM contributing editor **Niki Gratrix**, BA, Dip ION, mBANT, reports.



In May, the IFM's annual conference took place in San Francisco, with 1250 delegates attending. This was double the numbers since I last attended back in 2008, and it was clear there could have probably been double that if IFM organisers had booked a larger room – the event was completely sold out by March this year.

There's little doubt the functional medicine “movement” is still well on the expansional march, attracting more healthcare practitioners from all backgrounds than ever before. The annual conference can feel a bit like attending the music industry's Grammy awards, with all the big names you've heard of rolled out on stage together (think Eminem and Elton John) and this year definitely didn't disappoint.

One of the highlights came on day one, with three leading nutrition experts brought on stage to present, and then debate as a panel, “What's the Right Diet?” It was moderated by Christopher Gardner, PhD, professor of medicine at Stanford University Prevention Research Centre.

Eat the Mediterranean diet?

First up, IFM faculty member, founder of the Scripps Centre for Integrative Medicine and board-certified cardiologist Dr Mimi Guarneri, MD, presented the benefits of the Mediterranean diet. Dr Guarneri made a compelling case, based on the research, for the diet which of the three was the highest in carbohydrates and includes bread, cereals and pasta; it is also high in fruit, vegetables, olive oil, legumes and nuts, with a moderate intake of fish and poultry, and low in red meat, dairy and alcohol.

Dr Guarneri took us through major studies, including the GISSI-Prevenzione Trial, SUN study, Health Professionals follow-up study, EPIC, NHS II, the Lyon Diet Heart Study, the HALE study and other trials all showing reduced rates of diabetes, heart disease, dementia, mortality, arthritis and increased telomere length. However, she also emphasised the importance of whole grains, and organic unrefined and unprocessed sources.

No...go Paleo

Just when you thought you were about to buy a “Mediterranean Diet Forever!” t-shirt, Dr Loren Cordain, PhD, the author of the first Paleo diet book and currently a professor at Colorado State University, came back with a robust rebuttal – not quite a knock-out, but enough to make you replace your Mediterranean fridge magnet with a “Paleo Forever” one.

First, Dr Cordain made the case for a grain- and dairy-free, higher animal protein diet based on evidence from the diets of hunter-gatherers. He then took us through evidence suggesting that while observational studies support the Mediterranean diet, meta-analyses of randomised controlled trials are less supportive, and that a Paleo approach was generally superior – based on the research. Highlighting that dairy, bread and grains are not so healthy, Cordain made the case that these components make the diet less micronutrient-rich than the Paleo diet.

He then proceeded to tear into the studies, going on to show that no hunter-gatherers were vegetarians, that vegetarian/vegan diets do not reduce mortality rates

from all causes, and that vegetarian diets are a poor source of essential nutrients including B12, omega-3, iron, zinc, iodine and vitamin D, that the diet contains concentrated sources of anti-nutrients (grains and legumes) and that soy intake is associated with thyroid problems.

But look at the data on a vegan/vegetarian diet!

Just when you thought that a supporter of a vegetarian/vegan diet could not possibly come back from that, Joel Fuhrman MD, *New York Times* bestselling author, PBS tv show host and family physician, presented his Nutritarian diet, which is a primarily vegetarian diet based on high nutrient/low calories, focused on vegetables, beans, fruit and nuts – and meat zero-three days per week. As a dairy-free, grain-free diet, it addressed these issues raised by Cordain about those two food groups.

Fuhrman then presented all the data linking animal protein intake with decreased lifespan and increased cancer rates. He focused on insulin-like growth factor (IGF-1) as a risk for cancer and shorter lifespan, and demonstrated evidence that protein and dairy increase IGF-1 and cancer rates, quoted studies linking bowel cancer with meat intake, reviewed data on high cardiovascular disease rates in ancient civilisations including the Inuit and Mongols, the positive evidence for “resistant starch” in beans and, finally, studies showing superior health with a vegetarian diet with health conscious non-vegetarians. These include the Adventist Mortality study, Adventist Health study, Oxford Health study, Health Food Shoppers study, Heidelberg study,

EPIC Oxford study, and Adventist Health Study 2. Fuhrman was then stopped by the other presenters when he started to show his patient case studies (too anecdotal, plus he was going past his time slot!).

A lesson in cherry-picking?

The fun really started during the final panel discussion, when Prof Gardner started by accusing all the speakers of “cherry-picking” studies to support their cases – which of course they all had done. Then each of the presenters was compelled to agree with Gardner as he proceeded to tear apart all the forms of research studies used in their arguments.

The panel had to agree that meta-analyses can be widely abused and are notorious for including horrible as well as great papers in the overall analysis. Secondly, he pointed out that observational data is also notoriously unreliable when it comes to diet; often participants are not following diet guidelines and observational studies do not confirm causality. Single risk factor studies (such as Fuhrman used for IGF-1) are also enormously problematic in terms of establishing causality, he said.

In response, Fuhrman argued that risk factor studies can be used to explain why other corroborating evidence works, then turned on Guarneri for using studies showing lowered obesity rates to support her case. He pointed out that thin people aren't necessarily healthy – to which Guarneri swiftly conceded, saying she was actually a lifelong vegetarian and wished IFM had given her his slot on arguing for the vegetarian case (peals of laughter from the audience).

Just when I started to think I should have stayed in the accountancy profession, some clear consensus was established among the panel, and useful conclusions were drawn for everyone to take away.

Points of agreement...

Terrifyingly, the panel agreed that in fact up to 70% of the standard American diet (SAD) currently consists of processed and refined carbohydrates and fats, foods the entire panel agreed should be taken out of the diet completely. The panel agreed:

- Take out trans fats completely.

- Take out refined sugar and stick to low glycaemic foods (fruit ok, not fruit juices, careful with dried fruit).
- Take out refined flour.
- Reduce or avoid potatoes.
- Go for whole foods, ideally organic, unrefined and unprocessed.
- On average around 30% of calories should come from fruit and vegetables.

...and disagreement

So if 30% of the current 70% of the SAD which is processed and refined foods should be replaced with fruit and vegetables – the panel debated what should the final 40% be replaced with?

Guarneri was happy to include grains, as long as gluten sensitivity had been ruled out, and the grains were whole – such as steel cut oats, rye and quinoa. Cordain disagreed, stating gluten was just the “tip of the iceberg”, and that humans don't need to eat grains and they contain no nutrients which can't be replaced with other foods.

And what about animal protein intake? Guarneri supported around 10% from seasonal, local sources, and wild (such as wild salmon), Fuhrman felt it would be better to reduce it to around 5% of calories and from fish only.

Cordain then confirmed that, based on the hunter-gather diet, his research is showing that up to a whopping 55% of calories can come from animal protein, as long as grains are removed from the diet and a high fruit and vegetable intake is maintained.

Let's not forget personalisation

In conclusion, while there is still clear disagreement about the exact “right diet” and clearly principles of personalised medicine need to come into this story – as one man's meat may be another man's poison as the current exploding nutrigenomics literature confirms – our biggest battle is clear. We can be secure in the knowledge that just getting our patients and clients off the 70% processed and refined foods that most of them are eating and on to any of these three diets is likely to improve their health in the long term.



Niki Gratrix, BA (Hons), DipION, mBANT, is one of the UK's leading nutritional therapists specialising in Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME and related illnesses. She is one of CAM's contributing editors and a former CAM Award winner. See her website for practitioners at www.ExpertPractitioner.com.

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