

Recovering the Wisdom of Native Nutrition

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Type II Diabetes has become a major health concern for Americans as it now afflicts nearly 8% of the total population (American Diabetic Association, 2010). Among American minorities, this percentage is even higher. For Native Americans in particular, the prevalence rate is 12.2%, much more than that of the population writ large ("National Diabetes Fact Sheet," 2007). Arguably the leading cause of type-II diabetes among minorities is a hastened adoption to the standard American diet. Governmental hand outs force upon native populations a diet of cheap and accessible foods which then require an abandonment of a culturally indigenous diet. Coupled with restricted access to what was their land (for farming and hunting), Native Americans can no longer consume the diets of their ancestors. By looking at the spiritual components and historical approaches to diet of the Native Americans, perhaps we can learn to break the cycle that perpetuates the increased prevalence of type-II diabetes.

The Traditional Native American Diet

Central to almost every indigenous diet is acknowledgement of the spiritual component to gathering, preparing, eating and enjoying food. Specifically in the Native American tradition, great care was taken in each of these aspects. Ceremonial acknowledgement and offerings to the earth were made in exchange for her sustaining resources. A Northern Cheyenne woman, Dr. Henrietta Mann, chair of the Native American Studies Department at Montana State University states, "We have spiritual

responsibilities to renew the Earth and we do this through our ceremonies so that our Mother, the Earth, can continue to support us” (Taliman, 2002). Another example comes in Lakota medicine man John (Fire) Lane Deer’s book *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*, when he states,

“When we killed a buffalo, we knew what we were doing. We apologized to his spirit, tried to make him understand why we did it, honoring with a prayer the bones of those who gave their flesh to keep us alive, praying for their return, praying for the life of our brothers, the buffalo nation, as well as for our own people...To us life, all life, is sacred” (p. 122).

Though traditional diets varied among tribes, mostly due to location and climate, all were based on myriad animal and plant foods direct from the earth; This is often referred to as a “hunter-gatherer diet.” President of the Weston A. Price Foundation, Sally Fallon Morell notes that the Native American Diet consisted of wild game, plant foods and fermented foods (Morell, 1999). Different foods and different preparations varied depending on whether they were being used in ceremony, for healing, or for aging populations.

When hunting, the entire animal was eaten out of respect for the taken life of the creature, a belief in not wasting resources, and the believed sacred healing properties of each animal part. For example, the lean animal meat was mixed with the animal's fat (and sometimes berries) to create pemmican, a nutritious fat and protein rich staple of

the Native American diet. Being tender, an unborn fetus of an animal was fed to the elderly to aid in chewing. Brains, tripe, bone marrow and the second stomach were often consumed raw while utters, tongue and organs were almost always boiled, dried, roasted or baked. Every piece down to the hooves and blood were consumed or used and nothing was wasted. Certain foods were deemed appropriate for men, such as ribs and organs, and others for women, like intestines full with manure (Morell, 1999). Fermented foods such as breads and broths were respected for their nutritious qualities, but perhaps none so much as the fermenting contents found within an animal's gut. John (Fire) Lame Deer states that when eating, "Those buffalo guts, full of half-fermented, half-digested grass and herbs, you didn't need any pills and vitamins when you swallowed those...That was food, that had power." (Lame Deer & Erdoes, 122).

Perhaps even more of a staple than hunting, the planting and sowing of seeds and harvesting crops has been a mainstay of most Indigenous cultures and the Native Americans are no different. To the Haudenosaunee culture (also known as the Iroquois League or Six Nations) the "Three Sisters"-corn, beans and squash- have been a staple of their diet for at least eight centuries. Wild rice was a staple for tribes living near bodies of water. Winona LaDuke speaks of the *Anishinaabe* Akiing, the original inhabitants of the Great Lakes region and quotes that "Wild rice offers amino acids, vitamins, fiber and other essential elements...a food that is uniquely ours, a food used in our daily lives, our ceremonies, and our thanksgiving feasts" (LaDuke, 2005, p. 169). Crops were clearly central to the dietary regime of most Indigenous populations.

Diabetes

For hundreds of years, people have been raping and pillaging the land from the Indigenous Native people of North America. Europeans first competed with the natives for access to game and later wiped out whole colonies of buffalo and agricultural systems in an effort to destroy entire tribes and populations. Native Americans were thereby forced to move around and were cut off from their own land and unable to hunt and gather in their traditional fashion. Over the years Indigenous tribes had to abandon their traditional means of preparing food and to rely on governmental rations to avoid starvation. These rations were that which might be suitable as staples for a European population, but the refined white flour, potatoes and sugar were foreign substances to the natives and began a long standing trend of chronic disease (LaDuke, 2005).

For minorities like Native Americans, the increasing prevalence of type-II diabetes is growing even more quickly than in the general American population. Native Americans are fewer generations removed from their traditional food preparation techniques thereby making this change to their diet all the more drastic. Nutrition professor Harriet Kuhnlein of McGill University writes that “the replacement of indigenous foods with a diet composed primarily of modern refined foods is the centerpiece of the [diabetes] problem” (Kuhnlein, 1989). Additionally, the gardening, harvesting, fishing and hunting incorporated into their way of life were essential physical activities ensuring the health of the Native Americans. Many health problems plaguing the population are almost exclusively due to a lack of exercise and drastic dietary alterations.

So What is to be Done?

“Before we can start talking about nutrition, we have to renew the spiritual connection our people had with food as a gift from the Creator. It makes sense for us to renew our bodies with that traditional source” – Lorelei Decora, Winnebago nurse and activist, (LaDuke, 2005, p. 191).

A study conducted in 2005 by Kendra Kattelman, PhD, RD charted the body mass index (BMI) and weight loss of participants from the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation who were exposed to a culturally sensitive educational program based on the Medicine Wheel Model for Nutrition. The education consisted of six nutrition lessons on the model which patterns its recommendations for protein, carbohydrate and fat intake on that of a traditional consumption of the Northern Plains Indians. Protein would make up 25% of the energy consumed, carbohydrates 45-50%, and fat 25-30%. (Kattelman et al., 2009). The results found that participants experienced significant weight loss when exposed to the educational program while the control group experienced no weight loss at all. Continuing efforts to present applicable and culturally sensitive nutrition education is part of the solution.

The Weston A. Price Foundation website notes that some indigenous peoples still live in traditional ways on their lands and that “given the long history of indigenous peoples’ displacement and the unjust appropriation of native lands, supporting the cultural continuity of remaining groups is one important step toward rectifying the ills of

the past” (Morell, 1999). A list of organizations one might support in continuing these efforts appears on the Price Foundation website, www.westonaprice.org. The Tribal Self-Governance Initiative under the Indian Health Service sector of the Department of Health and Human Services is also advocating for Native Americans having more control over their own affairs ("Self-Governance Communication & Education," 2009). Winona LaDuke even references individually wealthy parties who purchase land for Native American so they can return to a more traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle (LaDuke, 2005).

With any effort to combat the rising problems with type-II diabetes among Indigenous peoples comes the need for collaboration and a multi-faceted approach. The time it will take to relearn the benefits of indigenous food practices, enact policy changes to allow indigenous peoples to do so, and create new habits around the procurement and preparation of food will indeed take patience and time. On a macro level, the government must allow Indigenous peoples the right to live life, including the right to hunt and farm, in their traditional manner. On a micro level, individuals need return to a more indigenous diet and not rely on the cheap processed foods more readily available. At the heart of this effort must come a respect for the earth which provides us with the sustenance to live another day. As said by Dr. Henrietta Mann, and Northern Cheyenne woman and chair of the Native American Studies Department at Montana State University, “Mutuality and respect are part of our tradition—give and take. Somewhere along the way, I hope people will learn that you can’t just take, that you have to give back to the land” (Taliman, 2002).

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