What Should We Eat?

Eat food. Not too much. Mostly Plants.

How can we reconcile conflicting claims about diet and health?

Ex: Low-fat diet: does it protect against cancer or not? Is being overweight bad for your health or not? Does fiber prevent colon cancer or not? Do omega-3 fats (in fish oil) cut your risk of heart disease or not?

I. From Foods to Nutrients

-Food versus edible foodlike substances which advertise health claims

-idea that specific "nutrients" confer health advantage- implies scientific advances

derives from research into macronutrients: components of food like protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals. Necessary for good health (treatments for scurvey, pellagra, beriberi, etc).

pushed out food as critical consideration in diet

led to Senate select Cmte on Nutrition: 1984 Pyramid

A). Nutritionism:

- ideology

-assumption that nutrient, not food, is primary

-only experts understand nutrients

-goal of eating is to maintain & promote bodily health

Implications:

1. Pleasure in eating is irrelevant, "nutritionism" is what leads to good health

2. no qualitative difference between foods, if "nutrients" are there
Problems with Implications:

1. Are pleasure, socialization associated with food unimportant?
   - French Paradox
   - Experiments with Swedish and Thai women fed spicy, bland, or highly "nutritious" paste

2. Reductionist Science: problem with "nutrient-by-nutrient- science is that it takes the nutrient out of the context of food, the food out of the context of diet, and the diet out of context of lifestyle"
   - isolating individual nutrients ignores complex interactions
   - whole is more than the sum of its parts: beta carotene found in carrots works differently when you consume it naturally rather than in a pill. (decreases risk of cancer in fresh produce, increases it in supplement).

B). Science of Diet is Complex, Yet Experiments are Simple

- we eat foods in combination with each other. We don't know what is important, how all chemicals interact.
- Lifestyle is also very important: can confound results
  - e.g. if you eat a lot of meat, you're probably not eating a lot of vegetables
  - health benefits of vegetarian diet comes from study of 7th Day Adventists

Study in Greeks, Italians, Japanese: increased meat consumption, cholesterol, yet decreased rate of heart disease. Why?

- some studies suggest it is more important to increase the number of healthy foods regularly consumed than to decrease the number of unhealthy foods

C). The Western Diet
- people who eat the way we eat in America have increased rates of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, obesity than people eating traditional diets
-decades after nutrient-based advice have only made problem worse

1. **From Whole Foods to Refined**: modern diet is predigested, more readily absorbed

2. **From Complexity to Simplicity**: nutritional quality of food is decreased by chemical fertilizers, plant breeding techniques, etc. Fortification of foods is necessary - modern diet is primarily processed corn, soybeans, and refined rice and wheat - in past, food came from over 3000 species

3. **From Leaves to Seeds**: micronutrients found in leaves are missing in our diets - anti-oxidants - omega -3 fatty acids: primary source is green plants (algae, grass) - ratio of omega 6 to omega 3 today 10 to 1; in past, 1 to 1 - involved in health problems like heart disease, diabetes

4. **From Food Culture to Food Science**: loss of food traditions. Undermined by industry promoting new, "improved" products

**What should we do?**

**D). Beyond Nutritionism:**

1. eat food: what you great-grandmother would eat

2. Avoid those bearing health claims: AHA claims are bought

3. Avoid products containing unrecognizable, unpronounceable, or numerous ingredients. Avoid HFCS.

4. Shop at Farmer's Market

5. Pay more, eat less:

6. Eat Mostly Plants

7. Eat more like the French, or Italians, or Japanese

8. Cook, plant a garden

9. Eat like an omnivore

10. Don't Stress about "bad foods" you eat