

The way we used to eat

Why we can learn a thing or two from our grandmothers when it comes to diet. By Charlie Wilson.

It was a lovely, warm, sunny afternoon in early spring and I was sitting in the garden of my parents' house on a recent trip back to England. My grandmother was sitting next to me, my great aunt to her left, my brother and sister-in-law were opposite me and my little two-year-old nephew was running around the yard chewing on a brightly-colored packaged snack. My parents were busy in the kitchen preparing tea and coffee.

As I regretfully watched my nephew enjoying his "treat", it struck me that there were four generations present that day and how absurd it must be for my 85-year-old grandmother and 90-year-old great aunt to even imagine eating such a treat when they were two years old. So I began asking them about the food they ate when they were growing up and as I listened intently, this article was beginning to unfold.

Somewhere over the past four generations we have forgotten how to eat. We have lost the ability to taste real food; in fact most people have forgotten what real food is. I asked a child the other day if he knew where the beef came from that was in his burger. His answer was the supermarket. We have simply lost the connection to our food. Food has become a substance that has to taste good to fill an empty void and rarely is a second thought given to how and where it was grown, how it was manufactured or what it is doing to our body.

In my grandmother's generation, almost all food was naturally organic. They didn't spray large amounts of pesticides on the crops, cows were not injected with growth hormones, chickens were not given antibiotics, and animals were left to graze and roam outdoors. Food was grown and eaten locally; you didn't eat apples from Chile back then. Most people actually grew some of their own vegetables and all the meat and milk came from local farms. In fact the majority of fresh food never traveled further than two or three miles.

Meals were made from scratch and eaten in moderation. Lunch seemed to be the biggest meal of the day, meat was more of a condiment, snacking was not the norm and dieting was never heard of. My grandmother summed it up perfectly when she said, "We were brought up with the philosophy that you eat to live, not

live to eat."

So what changed? Why now, only four generations later, are we having to pay a premium to eat "organic" food? Why have we become a world obsessed with food and eating; a world where cancer, diabetes, heart disease and obesity have become the norm? A world where many grandmothers are in better health than their grandchildren?

The end of the Second World War brought with it a lot of social and industrial changes. Demand for faster, more convenient food grew rapidly which then led to the large-scale commercialization of farming. To keep up with the demand, farmers introduced single-crop systems as opposed to the traditional rotating of crops. This meant the farmers could concentrate on just one crop and mass produce it.

However, this was only possible with the use of chemical agents to increase yields and annihilate pests. The soil was no longer being replenished by the rotation of different crops and pests that once had difficulty establishing a foothold, as they only thrive on one type of plant, were now able to flourish. Using us as the guinea pigs for any harmful side effects, farmers now sprayed billions of pounds of synthetic chemical pesticides and fertilizers on their crops annually. To make it worse, the government subsidized many of these crops so small genuine farmers went out of business and today the food supply is controlled by a relatively small number of very large corporations.

In animal agriculture, cows, pigs and chickens are now confined to cages in massive indoor facilities, most never seeing the light of day. To ward off the disease created by these dirty, unsanitary conditions they are fed antibiotics and to increase growth or milk production they are fed hormones. Once slaughtered this meat that used to be ground and packaged by the local butcher who knew exactly where it came from now gets mixed with meat from dozens of other factory farms in huge central processing facilities.

Advancements in transportation meant produce could now be flown all over the world and suddenly we were eating apples from New Zealand and tomatoes from Mexico. Though food trade has been around for hundreds of years, it was previously kept to specialty products that couldn't be grown locally, like tea from

India, coffee from Ecuador and spices from Morocco. Now, even in the height of summer when there could be an abundance of local tomatoes, most tomatoes available in a store will have travelled hundreds of miles. And because food is travelling so far it needs to be preserved for longer, so yet again it's sprayed with another layer of chemicals.

As the food industry grew and profits began to soar, the quest to produce food more quickly and more cheaply created major advancements in food production technology that caused greater harm to the environment and our health than ever before. It cost more to manufacture ingredients that offered superior health so, looking to make the most profit, companies tended to use the cheapest ingredients without consideration for the possible effects on our bodies. These included such things as high-fructose corn syrup, sugar, salt, hydrogenated oils, artificial flavourings and colourings and bulking agents. "Food" became nothing more than calories and chemicals wrapped in a pretty package. Most of us became addicted to this, and now it's proving to be detrimental to our health.

As the company's pockets grew to supersize, so did the food portions, our waistlines and our disease rates. No longer satisfied with regular-sized portions we now began to eat double what we did before. In the past 20 years coke bottles have gone from 8oz to 20oz, bagels from 3 inch diameter to 5 or 6 inch, coffee from a small cup to a "grande" topped with whipped cream.

Junk food - which is, of course, best not eaten at all - has never been consumed in the quantities it is today. It is quite normal for one person to consume an entire family-sized pack of popcorn or tortilla chips as a snack. A meal may be a whole pizza washed down with a litre of soda and "rounded off" with a slice of cheesecake - portion sizes in each case being so large that this spread would quite easily have served a whole family not so long ago. The problem with all this food - apart from the fact it is loaded with salt, sugar and harmful fats - is that it contains zero vital nutrients so leaves us malnourished and starving for more.

In addition, all these chemical substances and food-like ingredients cause unnecessary stress as our bodies work overtime to eliminate the toxins. After many years a resistance is developed in the form of ill health and disease. As the accumulated damage spans such a long time, and health problems may not arise until later in

life, most people will not trace these problems back to the food they have been consuming all these years.

To combat our increasing ill health the drug companies jumped on the bandwagon and started creating drugs to fight any and all kinds of illness imaginable. There are pills for headaches, pills for heartburn, pills for allergies, pills for weight loss, pills to make you sleep. You name it - you can probably find a pill for it. Thanks to our ill health and our desire to feel well, the pharmaceutical industry became a multi-trillion-dollar business. Now, over 51% of the US is living on over-the-counter drugs to try and fight the damage created by other toxic substances they have consumed.

If my grandmother was sick she was confined to bed on a liquid diet; she never took any pills. My mother was given antibiotics for a serious infection otherwise it was bed rest and starvation. Me? I reached for the Advil as soon as I had a headache, which was usually most afternoons. Any infection more serious than a little cold and it was off to the doctor for an antibiotic prescription. My nephew has already been on antibiotics three times and that was before he even reached the age of six months.

It's no wonder we are living amongst an epidemic of disease. Just look at some of the US statistics. Currently, more than 64% of the US adult population is overweight or obese and almost 50% of children. One in three people will develop cancer, now the second leading cause of death in the US. Number one? Heart disease. Meanwhile, 18.2 million Americans have diabetes, and nearly a third of those people are unaware that they have it. We have surely reached a crisis point.

But it's not all bad! Let's think about this realistically. The bulk of all this has happened very rapidly, in a very short space of time. We are talking about 60 years or so. This leads me to believe that it won't take much time to rectify some of the damage we have done to the health of our bodies. It will just take conscious effort from everyone as some of the hardest things to counteract are the habits that have been ingrained in us since childhood. The rapid growth in the organic and health sector of the food industry proves people are searching for something that will make them feel well, that will give them energy, and that will make them feel good again. People are beginning to realize that something is not right.

Much of the problem lies with misinformation. Most people have a TV and watch it on a regular basis. Television is full of commercials and programs advertising all sorts of products containing toxic ingredients. We are constantly bombarded with information about the latest health claim: one minute you can eat this, the next you can't, one minute you need more of this, the next less. Food writer Michael Pollan calls it the age of "nutritionism" and for the consumer it's overwhelming.

Our bodies have the innate ability to heal themselves and with the right nourishment and mental attitude many diseases can be reversed and certainly prevented. Our bodies are also remarkable machines. They carry us around through our daily activities for the whole of our lives. When pain occurs, or something stops functioning correctly, it's our body's way of telling us something's not right.

The trouble in today's society is that every day we are continuously filling our bodies with more and more of the wrong fuel, and every day our bodies have to work overtime trying to process and eliminate these poisons so that eventually our body gives out and disease is formed. Or if we are lucky enough to avoid disease our bodies are just so exhausted old age creeps up on us more quickly than it should. By simply changing our choices we can begin to undo the harm we have done. It's really as simple as that.

And, as so often happens in life, perhaps we needed to go through this disconcerting period to bring us to our senses and reach an even higher level of health and awareness. We certainly know more about health and nutrition than we did before, and we have access to a whole array of health-enhancing produce and ingredients that have never been available before, giving us new options for eating real food in interesting and tasty ways.

One of the best health lessons I heard came from grandmother and real food advocate Joan Gussow. At 80 years old, Gussow is a living example of what it means to eat local, organic, seasonal food that is predominantly home grown, home prepared and eaten in moderation. Her lesson when it comes to food is simply to, "Trust nature not science".