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Study: Western Diet Bad for Human Health, Environment

by Rosanne Skirble



The globalization of Western eating habits is bad for human health and for the environment, according to a new study in the journal *Nature*.

In the study, [David Tilman](#), a University of Minnesota ecology professor, analyzed data from 100 countries to chart what people ate and how diet affected health. He noted a trend beginning in the 1960s: As nations industrialized, population increased and incomes rose. More people began to adopt the so-called Western diet, one high in refined sugar, fat, oil and meat.

The globalization of the Western diet — high in sugar, salt, fat, oil and meat — is increasingly bad for people's health and the health of the environment, a study of data from 100 countries contends.

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People began to get fatter and sicker.

"The excess in the 15 richest nations of the world right now," Tilman said, "is on the order of about 400 or 500 extra calories a day beyond what people need, and that leads people to gain weight."

Overweight people are at greater risk for noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and some cancers, Tilman said.

"Diabetes is shooting to very high rates in the United States and across Europe," he said. "Heart disease is a major cause of mortality in the Western countries. And unfortunately, when people become industrialized, if they adopt this Western diet, they are going to have these same health impacts, and in some cases if you are Asian, you have them more severely than even happens in the West."

Effect in China

That's the case in China, where diabetes has skyrocketed from less than 1 percent to 10 percent of the population having diabetes over a 20-year period.

"It has not leveled off yet. It is still going up," Tilman said. "And that is happening all across the world, in Mexico, in Nigeria and so on, in nation after nation."

The diet bad for humans is also bad for the environment, he said. Experts predict that as global population grows, more forests and tropical habitats will be converted into farmland for crops or grazing pasture for cattle to meet the increased demand for food.

"We are likely to have more greenhouse gas released in the future from agriculture because of this dietary shift than all the greenhouse gas that right now comes

out of all the cars, and all of the airplanes, boats and ships, all forms of transportation,” Tilman said.

Land use change also promotes species extinction and loss of biodiversity.

Tilman said reducing the Western diet's adverse impact on human health and the environment is one of the greatest challenges facing humanity.

One solution he presents is to leave the Western diet behind, something that Jacqueline Rogers and Mike Richman know something about. The two VOA staffers have each lost 22 kilograms (48.5 pounds) and kept off the weight.



VOA staffers Mike Richman and Jacqueline Rogers have switched from the Western diet, a move that has taken off weight, improved their health and lessened their footprint on the environment. Elizabeth Pfozter / VOA

Rogers, who has a family history of diabetes, calls herself a reformed carboholic.

“I ate lots of carbs [carbohydrates] all the time. That was my go-to [food] — pastas, rice, potatoes, breads. I never met any of those things in any form that I did not like. I had to switch that around and become more vegetable-based, more fruit-based, more protein-based. That, plus physical activity, made the big difference for me.”

Richman, 53, says he was always athletic but could not compete like he once did because he was overweight. Cycling propelled him to get in shape. His new routine includes visits to a gym, lifting weights and running on a treadmill.

So long to sweets

Richman has also changed his diet. “It has not been anything as complicated as what Jackie has done,” he said. “I have just cut out a lot of sweets, a lot of junk. And also, just simple things like walking up the stairs instead of taking the elevator. I always do that.”

Richman can now complete single-day, 160-kilometer (100-mile) bike rides.

“I feel great. I feel that if I wanted to play basketball again, I could probably do the same things I did in my 20s and

30s,” he said.

Rogers says she tries not to be too sedentary on the job.

“I have to force myself to get up, go out, walk around the building, walk up the stairs. ... I have to make myself do something throughout the day, not just sit at the computer.”

For her, the switch in lifestyle has been a matter of making choices that are better for her health and the health of the planet. And, she adds, she no longer has any sign of diabetes.

<http://www.voanews.com/content/study-western-diet-bad-human-health-environment/2520952.html>