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Which diet tribe are you?

Which diet tribe are you? Paleo; vegan; keto; low-carb; gluten-free; fishetarian; Mediterranean? Paleos avoid grains and beans in the belief that our ancestors didn't eat them and we are not well adapted. Vegans eat lots of them in the belief that meat is making us sick, and on the moral ground of 'thou shalt not kill'. The video *What the Health*, which turned many people vegan, falsely claims that sugar doesn't cause diabetes and dementia; it's animal fat that blocks arteries to the brain and insulin receptors. Ketogenic diet fans specifically eat lots of animal fats from fish, meat and dairy products to produce ketones – the body and brain's alternative fuel. Fat and cholesterol in eggs and meat is a good thing, they say, and is vital for the brain. 'Low-carbers' avoid all sugar and fast-releasing carbs such as grapes, raisins and bananas, which are making a comeback in a lot of processed vegan snacks. Gluten fighters claim gluten damages the gut and brain; they avoid all glutinous grains.

Evolution begs to differ. After the discovery of fire – about 500,000 years ago according to our DNA – we adapted to better digest carbs such as grains and beans with the arrival of more complex amylase digestive enzymes. The variability of our diet expanded as cooking food made these foods more digestible. Brain size expanded. Today, for large chunks of humanity, grains stand between mankind and starvation, providing more than half our food energy and protein. Civilization booms in the grain belt of Mesopotamia and along the water's edge – starting with the Sumerians and Egyptians over 5,000 years ago. Ancient gluten grains, such as kamut wheat, are now known to be anti-inflammatory and protective against diabetes and heart disease, unlike modern wheat. Brain size shrank a bit post the switch to agriculture, as diet and nutrition became more streamlined and limited (and possibly with the arrival of modern gluten-rich wheat), then increased with the industrial revolution and less famine.

Despite the paleo claim of the unsuitability of beans, rich in protective phytoestrogens, there's a suggestion that dairy-free bean eaters could avoid breast and prostate cancer. Studies show the rural Chinese, eating tofu every day, have less than a hundredth of the risk of these cancers than Westerners – a situation that's changing with coca-colonization.

But the real growth in brain size and intelligence appears to have happened much earlier with *Homo aquaticus* – our distant ancestors who lived in wetlands, swamplands, lakes and oceans, and became upright as a result of wading and eating abundant marine

food rich in omega-3, so concentrated in the human brain and critical for intelligence and health. The Indonesian 'sea nomads' claim to be able to hold their breath underwater for up to 13 minutes – that's as long as dolphins and penguins – thanks to enlarged spleens, an evolutionary requirement for this adaption. We were heading for an aquatic life based on the sea's nutritious food supply. Yet the NHS has told doctors not to prescribe omega-3 for heart disease or depression, despite the gold standard of evidence: meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials showing that omega-3 fish oils are effective for both major and minor depression, without side-effects. How stupid is that?

Vegans want to avoid fish, sometimes for ecological reasons: the belief that it's running out or it's all polluted with mercury and PCBs. But, unless supplementing algal DHA, the big risk is what happens in pregnancy to the unborn baby without enough omega-3 DHA. The mother's brain size shrinks as the foetus takes what it essentially needs; a case of 'mummy, I shrank your brain'.

Like football enthusiasts, are we splitting into diet tribes? It's a younger trend, with those aged 18-34 significantly more likely (45%) to adopt a certain diet than adults aged 65 and over (28%). Millennials put more trust in social media influencers advocating specific diet approaches than the more traditional, one-size-fits-all guidelines such as the UK Government's EatWell Plate. One thing is for sure: everybody's talking about nutrition.



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