Question from a reader: Is there a happy medium to eating well? Sure, working out is obviously important, but does a regular Joe who wants to live healthy need to eat so restrictively all the time? ZH

There is a happy medium to eating well and I encourage everyone to find it. However, in terms of eating restrictively I would like to offer another approach when thinking about healthy eating.

Let us began with the idea of "happy medium" and the hormone cortisol. Cortisol is a major life hormone produced in the adrenal glands and is controlled by the adrenal, hypothalamus, and pituitary glands. Cortisol affects many of the body's processes including controlling blood sugar levels, regulating metabolism, help reduce inflammation, assist with memory, controls the effect of salt and water balance, and supports the developing fetus during pregnancy in addition to helping to control blood pressure. Cortisol is also produced when the brain perceives a threat in what we call the "fight or flight" response.

It is the perception of threats when it comes to eating that makes cortisol problematic for us. When we experience stress in relation to food or eating we experience elevated cortisol levels. Elevated cortisol levels can dramatically influence weight gain. For this reason it is important that we develop a sense of ease as opposed to restriction when it comes to food and eating well.

The second part of your question relates to how we define healthy eating. When I think of healthy eating I think of the zoo. The animals we enjoy at the zoo have particular, but not restrictive diets. The eagle, which is a meat eater, does not have the diet of the humming bird which eats nectar. The polar bear, another meat eater, does not have the diet of the zebra, the elephant or the gorilla. What does this mean for you and me as human beings?

Despite classification, animals eat according to genetic makeup and have specific foods. I will address food, nutrition and supplementation in a future series, "Sheep Don't Walk Backwards." Food does not have to be restrictive if we understand what types of food, like the animals in the zoo are good for us.

For instance, when you hear that an individual or group is lactose intolerant, or that others are allergic to gluten, what this means is that those foods do not assimilate or belong in the body of these individuals or groups, the result is often inflammation in the form of weight gain, joint pain or in some cases severe illness.

What I suggest in cases like these is to find foods that you love to eat but chose ingredients that are good for you and make the meal or deserts yourself. If this is too much work, then the next step is to eat what you like but work hard to control how much you eat so that these foods do not become a problem in your efforts to live a healthy lifestyle.

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