

Portsmouth Herald Archive, Thursday, August 2, 2007

The things we give up

When your doctor says 'These foods are hurting you'



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August 02, 2007 6:00 AM

There are times a doctor's prescription is "lay off the Whopper." The obesity epidemic certainly has doctors discussing our diets more frequently.

And chances are, at some point in your life you'll get the talk on heart-healthy. Thin or chunky the recommendation will come: cut the salt, fats, junk and other delights. But, there are times even the best of food might not be right.

Christopher Gowell of Eliot, Maine, has dealt with allergies and subsequent respiratory issues for eight years, along with other ailments, including joint discomfort. But it was the respiratory problems that started controlling her life, requiring daily shots and numerous medications.

In addition, she had trouble losing weight, something she saw as unrelated.

"I would be fine during the day, but as soon as I finished dinner I would keep eating till I went to bed. ...; It was a total addiction. ...; I felt helpless at times," she explained.

Allopathic medicine had done what it could. At a physical low, she tried an acupuncturist a friend recommended. In addition to acupuncture and herbal remedy recommendations, he told Gowell to stop eating wheat/gluten products, dairy and sugar.

"I didn't know if I could," but desperation won and she gave it a shot.

"And it was totally easy!" she reports, the wonder still evident. She switched dairy for soy and found she really didn't miss wheat or sugar.

"But, more astonishing, I quit having food cravings. I was totally surprised at how easy it was and very surprised at how much better I felt."

There is a marked change in her allergy discomfort.

"I'm about 85 percent better," she adds. "I was never aware of how I felt after food. I lived in my head, had no sense of my physicality. Now I do."

And for that reason she'll continue.

"Absolutely. I suppose I might be able to add a few things back in. But, I truly love feeling well and that takes precedent."

Yuri Belopolsky, Family Acupuncture & Holistic Medicine, Kittery, Maine, is the practitioner Gowell sought. He says the principle applied is fundamental to Chinese medicine, an art he studied with a master. He's also a former veterinarian. So, Belopolsky walks with a strong understanding in both Western and Eastern approach.

When asked if the foods he suggested Gowell discontinue were simply unhealthy and automatically recommended for elimination, in contrast to common belief, he said no.

"There are no bad foods. There are conditions when certain foods are not good for us," he says, in his strong Ukrainian accent.

In Chinese medicine all foods are related to the health and function of different organs.

"The idea is that different organs have a lot of different functions, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual," he explains. Wheat, sugar and dairy are all related to spleen/pancreas health in the Chinese system, and heavily used in American diets.

"Even in Western medicine the pancreas is involved in sugar metabolizing. That's why pancreas problems lead to diabetes."

The Chinese system sees a relationship between thinking and spleen/pancreas as well.

"So, in our society the average American has two strong impacts on spleen/pancreas — (these foods) and from the mental level and emotional from thinking. ...; So we get this chain going. We think too much, eat more sugar, think ...; and so on."

Finally, in Chinese medicine, the spleen deals with water in the body.

"When the spleen's not functioning right ...; it cannot deliver water in the proper way, and because of that we have excessive liquids in the body. In this situation to interrupt the

chain, we have to cut out something. We can't stop thinking, but we can stop eating foods that load the spleen."

There are other body elements and relationship. Therefore food additions and eliminations vary, as in any health system.

"You have to stop wrong foods for right."

Tamara Leibowitz's son doesn't have the option of occasionally eating some foods. The 8-year-old boy is allergic to milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts (and all the other) and shellfish, which, along with soy and wheat, are the most common food allergens.

The first indication her son had allergies was as an infant. He developed a moderate case of eczema. Later, when he developed mild hives after going on solid food, they suspected milk.

"I gave up milk, but he was still having problems."

Other allergies were discovered.

The milk allergy is the most severe, anaphylactic, or life-threatening. Initially they thought it was more moderate.

"We were very wrong," says the Portsmouth resident. "He went into a full anaphylactic shock when he took some of his brother's milk."

"We're dealing with it in every part of our life, everything we do ...; we have to think of his needs beforehand. If you think of your daily life and how often food is involved it gives you an idea."

Her son also has contact sensitivity, common with children, but generally not life-threatening, she explains. Some, notably with peanut allergies, can be affected by smell. The upshot is the entire family remains vigilant, she says. Her son carries shots with him at all times.

"He's absolutely amazing. He's such a huge advocate for himself and outspoken and articulate."

Leibowitz suggests those dealing with food allergies connect with a local group at seacoastfoodallergy@yahoo.com.

Barbara Deuell, MD, allergist immunologist with Allergies Associate of NH, Portsmouth, has seen an upswing in food allergies in her practice.

"There is definitely a documenting of an increase of the prevalence of allergies in general," she says. But reasons are less clear. There are three major theories. The hygiene

hypothesis is that children are kept in very clean environments and immunized against multiple diseases.

"And so the immune system doesn't fight infection as much. The emphasis is shifting toward allergies instead," Duell says.

There's also the theory of environmental exposure, which has changed over the decades.

"We're living inside more, so we're dealing more with indoor allergies. Tighter buildings, less fresh air may have an influence."

Finally it could be the contemporary diet, "more prepared foods, less whole foods off the farm."

Most food allergies occur within the first five years of life.

"It's not very typical that the first reaction is life-threatening. It can happen. But, that would be the exception rather than the rule," Duell says.

Another diet issue is food intolerance.

"It's different. ...; It's not making an allergic antibody to it. ...; For example lactose intolerance, you get symptoms ...; but not an allergic reaction."

Another difference is you're less likely to die from a food intolerance, "but you can be very ill."

Helen Sanders of Newmarket is intolerant of milk and suffers from celiac disease, a wheat intolerance. She was told to avoid dairy and wheat, oats, rye and barley. Her celiac symptoms developed after the birth of her son. She lost a significant amount of weight. Eventually a gastroenterologist diagnosed the condition.

"Basically it's an inability to handle the protein in the wheat. It's an auto-immune response. So you end up damaging body parts if you continue," she explains. For many the symptoms include digestive issues, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting and weight loss.

"There is also a skin condition, ...; like eczema that won't respond to those treatments."

Sanders says there are people eliminating wheat for other reasons. Her own path, and creativity in the kitchen, lead her to create Little Bay Baking a business of both gluten- and wheat-free products.

"For a lot of us, being free of both has made a tremendous difference in our lives. ...; I haven't knowingly eaten anything with gluten in it since 1980," she says. "Luckily, there's a lot more choices than in 1980. ...; Things are pretty good now."

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