

Starting Strength

Protein

by

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The New York Times has a vested interest in maintaining the narrative – not just in politics and popular culture, but in the current medical dogma as well. The Received Wisdom must be defended, even if it's plainly wrong. The latest wrong thing: the poisonous nature of dietary protein.

In a piece entitled "[The Always Hungry Teenage Boy](#)," Perri Klass MD reminds us that teenage boys have a big appetite during their "growth spurt," but that they're eating the wrong stuff. Protein is bad, and the little snots are just gobbling it up.

Citing the new USDA Guidelines – the Government's suggested dietary standards that *still* recommend a diet low in fat and high in carbohydrates – the following gem was included: "Some individuals, especially teen boys and adult men, also need to reduce overall intake of protein foods by decreasing intakes of meats, poultry and eggs, and increasing amounts of vegetables or other underconsumed food groups."

The same government agency that has presided over the greatest explosion in Type II diabetes in the history of the human species is recommending that both growing boys and adult males eat less protein. They want us to eat more vegetables. Yes, potatoes are fine. And more bread, just hold off on the butter. Then the *real* nonsense starts, coming at you like the spacecraft in a J. J. Abrams movie.

Dr. Elsie Taveras, a pediatrician somewhere in the northeast, says about growing boys: "They're always hungry, and that hunger, and a lack of satiety with small portions, leads to impulsive eating and eating large portions." Right, Elsie. Because they're hungry. Trying to grow makes you hungry. Small meals based on cabbage and quinoa leave a kid looking for some ham and cheese. I guess Elsie forgot how she felt when she was a growing boy.

And then she says this: "And the foods they are choosing aren't really keeping them full, since foods with high fiber levels are the kinds of foods which do keep people full." Which is wrong. In the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* ([J Am Diet Assoc. 2004;104:1151-1153](#)), Dana Gerstein and colleagues discuss this situation. Satiation – the feeling that you're full right now, while you're eating – is best produced by carbs and fiber. But satiety – feeling like you've eaten enough *for a while* – is most effectively produced by eating protein. Dr. Taveras wants growing boys (which are composed largely of protein) to eat less of the foods that both help them grow and feel full between meals. She is wrong.

Protein

Lamentations continue: we're not eating our vegetables. Adolescent boys and young adult males eat too much protein, while girls and young women don't eat enough. Alison Field, an expert in obesity and eating disorders somewhere else in the northeast, laments that there's not enough research focused on boys. Starting at puberty, boys will gain more muscle mass while girls will gain more fat mass. Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition somewhere in the northeast, tells us that boys should eat more vegetables so they don't eat so much meat, because less meat and more vegetables is supposed to "better balance their nutrient intake."

Most adolescent girls are always trying to lose weight, whether they need to or not, according to Dr. Field, who forgot she told us that girls accumulate more fat than boys – who ate too much protein. Dr. Field also observes that adolescent boys may be trying to gain muscle mass, bulk up, and Get Big, especially if they're athletes. This, of course, drives them to eat *too much protein*. Dr. Klass, the author, thinks that Dr. Field thinks that boys and girls are influenced by airbrushed media images of lean and muscular sports figures, which cannot possibly be lean and muscular without the airbrush.

So the girls who ate less protein are fatter than the boys who ate *too much protein*, and therefore the boys should eat less protein. Like the girls. Who are fatter.

Fine. Now, here's the funny part, the medical dogma that is just wrong, and has been wrong for the 40 years I've been listening to it. Dr. Jerel Calzo, a developmental psychologist studying eating disorders in adolescent males somewhere in the northeast, says that extra protein is useless for driving the growth of muscle mass. It's just extra calories, he says. Turns to fat, he says. Best of all, he trots out everyone's favorite mythological dietary fantasy: Protein supplements can damage your kidneys, especially if you're dehydrated. But sports drinks are bad because they contain carbs – which were really good earlier – and the fact that they are designed to hydrate the body is just not sufficiently redeeming.

Fact: Muscle protein synthesis – the growth of skeletal muscle mass – responds to strength training, as we've discussed many times. But it certainly as hell also responds to nutrient intake as well, specifically [amino acid availability immediately after training](#). If a kid who wants to get bigger and stronger eats like the USDA health bureaucrats want him to, he is at a disadvantage to the kid who is careful to get enough protein, especially right after training in the form of a high-quality easily absorbed protein supplement.

Fact: Muscle protein synthesis – the process by which muscle mass increases in the body – occurs in response to both diet and exercise. The stress of a strength-training workout is a factor, as is an influx of [amino acids from a meal eaten shortly after training](#). Most of the studies investigating this suggest that it is some sort of age-related decreased sensitivity to amino acids at the cellular level, which can be overcome by upping the dose, and the quality of the dose.

The same signaling mechanism – elevated amino acid levels after protein ingestion – that grows muscles in boys who train correctly and eat enough protein also works to maintain muscle mass in older adults. But the process is less efficient the older you get, so *more*, not less, protein is necessary to drive muscle protein synthesis in older adults. But the USDA is advising adults to lower their meat intake, and some of us are dutifully obeying them, ignoring the fact that the Government hasn't been any better at nutrition recommendations than it has been at managing the wool subsidy program.

And finally, fact: There is absolutely [no evidence that elevated protein levels damage](#) the healthy kidney. In other words, if you do not have kidney disease, a high protein diet is not harmful to the healthy kidneys you've got. It won't make them sick. It will not hurt your kidneys. Moreover, it appears as

Protein

though kidney function adapts quite well to higher levels of dietary protein. Hundreds of millions of people eat a high-protein diet with absolutely no renal difficulty, and people all over the world have done so since The Dawn of Time. Anybody that tells you otherwise is not familiar with the literature. And any advice to limit protein intake on the basis of compromised kidney function is unreliable, baseless, unwarranted, and is probably politically motivated by the militant vegetarian movement, or perhaps by the idea that too much meat in the diet is not “fair” to others.

This all boils down to one aspect of the current popular culture narrative: boys and men don't *need* to be bigger and stronger. In fact, it's much better if they aren't bigger and stronger, because that is intimidating to people who aren't. So they will use every tool at their disposal to discourage the acquisition of muscle mass, up to and including lying about the medical ramifications of doing so. Look at this amazing paper by the aforementioned Dr. Calzo: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3718034/> Tell me that the man does not have an agenda here that involves more than your kidneys.

I don't care what health care professionals from the northeast have to say about it. Dietary protein is not a problem unless it is undersupplied. Adolescent boys have enough problems already, what with “abz” being the current focus and therefore not *enough* calories and protein being the real problem we practitioners who work with these kids see in the trenches. Girls have body-awareness problems too, none of which are helped by detached northeastern health professionals advising against “excessive” dietary protein intakes. This is just one more example of medical dogma doing more harm than good.

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