

Pastor's Corner – 7-13-2019 – Things I Have No Business Commenting On – Why we gain weight: An alternative hypothesis

Today I continue the age-old Adventist tradition of being a pastor with no formal medical training giving health advice. As always, check with your physician before you follow the advice of some dude who gets all his info from YouTube and websites. This time around I'll be talking about an alternative hypothesis that can help explain how we gain weight and why it can be so hard to get rid of it. This hypothesis is by no means widely accepted in the medical/nutrition community. There are clinical trials taking place that are trying to verify it but the jury is still out. All I'm saying is that this hypothesis isn't established fact (yet) but following the advice here isn't going to hurt you either - probably ;). It's not like I'm going to recommend dysentery as a weight loss strategy.

Let's start with the traditional model. The widely accepted theory of weight gain is something like this: weight management is all about calories in vs. calories out. If you eat more than you burn (called a positive energy balance) then you store the excess energy as fat and gain weight. It doesn't matter if the calories come from donuts or tofu, if you eat more than you burn you get fatter.

The answer to weight loss then is pretty simple, eat a bit less, move a bit more and the pounds will fall right off. Swap out high fat foods (which are calorie dense) for whole grains, fruit, and legumes (which are less calorie dense) and you'll be consuming fewer calories and lose weight. Easy peasy – except it's not.

I'm guessing you've tried to put that sage advice into practice (probably with dismal results). It's pretty obvious to anyone who's tried this approach that it doesn't work very well. What's even worse is that, on top of it not working, the calories in/calories out model puts the blame for failure squarely on the shoulders of those who are unable to lose weight. The assumption is that overweight people are just plain lazy and don't want to put in the work and self-control that it takes to lose the pounds. If you can't lose weight it must be because you refuse to give up your Big-Mac's in exchange for quinoa.

Of course, maybe you aren't lazy, unmotivated, and addicted to McD's. Maybe the model is broken. Maybe something else is going on here besides just calories in vs. calories out. Maybe there's, oh, I don't know, a hormone that triggers fat accumulation while at the same time inhibiting other hormones that trigger fat loss. Oh wait, there is, it's called insulin.

I've talked about insulin over the last couple of weeks and shared that the primary macronutrient that triggers the release of insulin is carbohydrates. It doesn't matter if they are simple carbs or complex carbs – all carbs trigger an insulin release. Yeah, sugars and processed carbs will spike insulin higher and faster, but all of them ask your body to release the hormone. Insulin is also the primary hormone that tells your body to store fat. What's worse is that when present in the bloodstream it suppresses the other hormones that would trigger fat to be released from storage. So, insulin has the double effect of inducing fat accumulation while at the same time suppressing fat metabolism. The alternative hypothesis for weight management includes consideration of the type of calories (primarily ones that trigger insulin), not just total calories consumed.

The traditional model equation is calories in minus calories burned = energy balance. The assumption is that you eat more than you burn because you lack self-control and because food is just too darn tasty. The alternative hypothesis suggests that high carbohydrate foods trigger insulin, insulin tells your body to store energy as fat (rather than burn it as fuel) leaving you under-nourished at a cellular level. Since your body is storing energy instead of making it available for use your cells start to send signals that they need to be fed. That triggers hunger, so you eat (probably more carbs) and repeat the cycle. This phenomenon is intensified in individuals who are insulin resistant/diabetic which is probably why weight gain and diabetes go hand-in-hand. In this alternative hypothesis the answer to weight loss is more about insulin management than it is about strict calorie control.

I have personally found this to be how things work for me. I am one of those weird people that tracks everything I eat, almost every day. I also weigh myself daily and am very systematic about my workout routine. There are times when I eat a very low carbohydrate diet (from 0-10% of total calories) and times when I allow myself to eat much more (60-70%). I have found that it is much easier to gain weight on a high carb diet with meals spaced throughout the day – even when I keep my fat intake very low (say 10-15% of total cals). On the other hand, I can lose weight very easily on a low carb diet. When I am eating carbs, I have more cravings. When I'm low carb I can fast 18-20 hours a day with almost zero hunger. If I pile on

the desserts at potluck then take a short sabbath afternoon nap, I'll have insane sugar cravings 2 hours later. Carbs make me hungrier sooner and I can eat way more of them (calorie-wise). Fat and protein are much more satiating, longer lasting and are easier to eat less of.

I'm convinced that insulin management is the key to weight management. Yes, you still need to be in a calorie deficit to lose weight and low carb isn't magic. It still takes work. But a calorie deficit is much easier to achieve (in my experience) when I am limiting foods that spike insulin.

So, how do you do it? One option is to cut back on those starchy, carby, tasty foods (including whole grains, legumes, and those things on the bottom of the food pyramid). Fruit can also be an issue (most of our fruit today has been bred and crossbred for increased sweetness). And by "cut back" I mean virtually eliminate. Those are the guys that trigger insulin and if you want to be serious about weight loss you have to get serious about managing the hormone that triggers weight gain. If you are at a healthy weight and those foods agree with your digestion – then feel free to go to town – eat em up, no problem. I was that way for the first 35 years of my life. Now that I'm in my 40's that is no longer the case. Some people have the right metabolism and intestinal microbiome that allows them to do great on a high carb, whole grain-based diet. Good for you. But that's probably not most of us. That's why two people living in the same house can eat the same thing day after day and one gains weight while the other remains slim. It's not because the overweight person is unmotivated or lazy, it's because their body works differently than yours. Diet is not one-size-fits-all.

Of course, if you cut back on carb consumption you have to replace those calories with something else. Feel free to increase fat and protein – but primarily fat. I know that seems backwards – but dietary fat isn't what makes you fat. Excess calories combined with a hormone that tells your body to store fat is what makes you fat.

A second option is to add in intermittent fasting. Try to confine your eating to a 6-hour window a few days a week. When you are fasting you aren't triggering an insulin release and it allows your body to shift into fat burning mode. But you have to actually fast. If you decide to drink lemon tea with honey to try and get you through the fast, well, you've just triggered an insulin response and broken the fast at a metabolic level. When I do my fasts I drink water, black coffee, or green tea (with no additives). Keep it simple.

Time to wrap it up here. The take-away here is that if you are struggling to lose weight the problem might be more about *what* you eat rather than *how much* you eat. Next time you try a weight loss program maybe try one that severely limits carbs and includes some intermittent fasting. Adopt a diet that limits an insulin response. What have you got to lose besides the weight? If it doesn't work, well that's no different than what you've tried before.

Happy Sabbath
Pastor Tyler