

WHAT IS THE PALEO DIET?

AND, HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?



ARTICLE BY REGISTERED DIETITIAN

JULIA ZUMPANO, RD

PUBLISHED BY THE CLEVELAND CLINIC

While we should all strive to eat a healthier diet, it can be hard to figure out how to do so. Should you eat more grains? Should you cut out dairy? What about sugar? What about fat?

That's why diets like the paleo diet – based on what our ancestors, who were hunters and gathers, ate – have become popular. Some diets can help guide us on what to eat with the goal of leading a healthier life.

But what exactly is the paleo diet and is it right for you?

Registered dietitian Julia Zumpano, RD, talks about the pros and cons of the paleo diet and how effective it can be.

What is the paleo diet?

“The paleo diet is based on foods that humans ate during that Paleolithic era, which was about 2.5 million to 10,000 years ago,” says Zumpano.

The paleo diet may also be known as the Stone Age diet, the caveman diet or the hunter-gatherer diet. The paleo diet food list includes:

- Fruits.
- Vegetables.
- Lean meat like grass-fed beef and game meats.
- Fish, including those high in omega-3 fatty acids like salmon and tuna.
- Nuts.
- Eggs.
- Seeds like chia seeds and flax seeds.

While that might seem like a good amount of foods you can eat, are there certain paleo diet rules? Yes, says Zumpano. You'll need to avoid the following foods:

- Grains.
- Legumes.
- Dairy.
- Refined or added sugar.
- Added salt.
- Highly processed foods.
- Certain vegetables that are high in starch like corn, peas and potatoes.

The thought behind the paleo diet is that it focuses on foods that our bodies are made to eat – and that our bodies haven't adapted to eating foods that evolved out of modern farming. It's believed that foods like grains and dairy contributes to heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

How effective is the paleo diet?

Zumpano says the paleo diet can be very effective.

“This diet focuses on including single-ingredient foods,” she says. “It eliminates all processed foods, which is what we strive for on any diet plan.” The fact that the paleo diet is a high-protein, low-carb eating plan can help with weight loss. But Zumpano warns that eliminating food groups like grains and dairy may leave you without certain nutrients your body needs.

“Without eating grains and dairy, you’re missing out on beneficial fiber, vitamins and minerals,” she cautions. But if you don’t tolerate grains or dairy well, eliminating those certain food groups may help you feel better.

“From a long-term standpoint, finding alternatives for grains, legumes or dairy will at least give you the nutrients you might be lacking from not having those foods,” notes Zumpano.

Paleo diet pros

Each diet comes with pros and cons, and Zumpano outlines some of the paleo diet’s benefits.

It can help with weight loss

By removing certain foods like processed foods, salty snack foods and high-fat foods – especially any store-bought packaged foods – you’re re-focusing your diet on eating whole foods. “Eating all those processed foods can lead to excess calories, high levels of cholesterol and contribute to high blood pressure,” explains Zumpano. “By reducing the amount of foods you’re eating, you’re eliminating foods that tend to be calorie-dense and tend to be foods that we sometimes overconsume, like cheese and carbs.”

Another plus? Foods that are high in protein tend to be very filling.

“That also helps support weight loss because you’ll feel more satisfied,” Zumpano says. “Cravings can be managed better on a high-protein, high-fiber diet. You’ll also be able to stick to it easier because the cravings for the other foods will subside over time.”

It may help lower blood pressure and cholesterol

Research shows that the paleo diet may help lower your blood pressure and cholesterol, as you’re cutting out foods that are high in fat and sugar. And it can even improve your glucose tolerance and increase insulin sensitivity, which may help manage Type 2 diabetes.

“You do want to be cautious, though, because in some cases, you can even increase your cholesterol, depending on how fatty your meat is,” states Zumpano. “You want to choose lean meat options like grass-fed beef loin, sirloin, flank or filet, skinless poultry and wild game versus pork or lamb or even fatty cuts of beef.”

Paleo diet cons

It's rare that a diet doesn't come without a downside. Zumpano explains what to consider before trying the paleo diet.

It excludes certain foods

While cutting out processed foods and sugar is a bonus of the paleo diet, not eating grains, legumes and dairy may not be the best move.

"Knowing that you can never eat grains, legumes or dairy again is concerning since they provide essential nutrients," says Zumpano. "It's best to find a diet that has a balance of food groups." As you're not getting essential fiber from grains, she adds that you need to make sure that you're consuming fruits and vegetables high in fiber like berries and Brussels sprouts. And for the calcium that you may be lacking due to the exclusion of dairy, she suggests getting those from vegetables like broccoli and spinach or including a fortified milk alternative to meet your needs.

Its long-term effects are unknown

While the paleo diet has a lot of perks, Zumpano says there isn't enough research yet on its long-term effects. She recommends avoiding a strict paleo diet for an extended period of time. Consider taking breaks to include some legumes, grains and dairy or transition to the Mediterranean Diet, which is somewhat similar to the paleo diet but not as restrictive. The Mediterranean diet has plenty of research that shows the positive long-term outcomes. "We know the Mediterranean diet is very safe to follow lifelong," Zumpano says. "You could follow the paleo diet until you feel you have met your health goals. Consider working with a registered dietitian to ensure you are maximizing your nutrient intake. If you choose, you can slowly incorporate small portions of the Mediterranean diet. Try adding a half cup of beans or cooked grains into your diet on a routine basis to gain those nutrients and make it more long-term sustainable." And trying to abide by such a restrictive diet like the paleo diet long term may be hard to follow. "There are some things that are advantageous to remove forever like refined flour and sugars, salty snack foods and processed meat and cheeses," notes Zumpano. "But following a diet that has the most variety of foods possible is most beneficial."

Should you try the paleo diet?

The paleo diet can help you achieve your short-term wellness goals, but long term, you should consider an option like the Mediterranean diet that focuses on well-balanced meals.

Also, if you have chronic kidney disease or are on a protein-restricted diet, the paleo diet may not be for you. And if you have digestive disorders like diverticulitis or diverticulosis, the nuts and seeds included in the paleo diet may be a problem. But Zumpano says you can still follow the diet by eliminating those categories of food.

For those who have a history of an eating disorder or are immunocompromised, you need to be careful with restricting calories. Zumpano says it's best to follow the paleo diet under the guidance of a healthcare professional.

There are plenty of paleo diet recipes you can find online like baked salmon or chicken salad. And snacks that are paleo-friendly include fruits, nuts, baby carrots and salsa. “Overall, the paleo diet is a great diet to try for a jump start,” Zumpano concludes. “If you’re concerned about your weight, want to focus on your gut health, are trying to manage your blood sugars or aren’t tolerating dairy, this could be a good option for you. But eventually, you want to incorporate more variety into your diet. And the Mediterranean diet is great for a lifelong eating plan.”