

Simplifying Too Much? The Macrobiotic Diet

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Gwyneth Paltrow does it. So does Madonna. Is it something that is gaining in popularity simply because of the celebrity buy in or is it really something that can be beneficial to everyone? This latest celebrity trend is related to a “new” diet, more specifically, the macrobiotic diet. Although there are some positive aspects of this diet, there are also some factors that cause concern.

The macrobiotic diet was first developed by a Japanese philosopher, George Ohsawa. The term itself is derived from the Greek root words, *macro* which means *long* or *great* and *bios* which means *life*. As its name implies, the macrobiotic diet was created to prolong the health and life of the individual who follows it. And, it can often be more than just a diet. Some consider it a quasi-religion or a belief and lifestyle. It is based on what Ohsawa believed is the balance of the yin and yang. In Asian philosophy, yin and yang are opposites (e.g., sweet and salty, hot and cold), but when combined, create a balance of the two. Foods are categorized as either possessing a yin or yang property. Ohsawa firmly believed that poor health is due to indulgence, excess and imbalance. In many ways, he is correct. However, Ohsawa advocates simplicity and abstaining from certain foods in order to achieve optimal health. Ohsawa developed and advocated the ten stages of restrictive eating. With each stage, more restrictions are placed on what foods are allowed. By the last stage, the dieter is left with only brown rice and water to eat. Not surprisingly, most health professionals deem this diet too restrictive and ultimately unhealthy.

Michio Kushi adopted and expanded the diet and philosophy that Ohsawa created. Eventually Kushi became the leader of the macrobiotic movement and founded the Kushi Institute to promote the macrobiotic philosophy and diet. Interest in this diet expanded when Anthony Sattilaro, a physician, wrote a book about the macrobiotic diet and how his prostate cancer went into remission as a result of following it. Sensational stories and testimonials often spark the public’s interest. Many people are especially interested in seeking a healthier way of eating that also integrates spiritual and physical health.

Kushi changed the original Ohsawa restrictive diet to its current low-fat, high fiber, mostly vegetarian diet. The diet is based on a whole grain foundation. Each meal is composed of 50-60% whole grains (such as brown rice, whole wheat berries, millet, rye, corn, barley, buckwheat). On occasion, pasta, baked goods, breads, and other flour products are allowed. Soups are also encouraged. One to two servings of soup are suggested per day. Typically the soups are made from miso (fermented soybeans) or shoyu (soy sauce). Many times vegetables are added to the soup since it should comprise 25-30% of the day’s intake. Vegetables can be consumed raw, others must be prepared steamed, boiled, baked or sautéed. Some vegetables such as potatoes, eggplants, peppers, tomatoes, asparagus, spinach, zucchini and avocados are also prohibited. They are said to contain too much yin (sugar/sweet). The other 10% of the

diet is made up of beans. The beans can be consumed in the cooked form or as bean byproducts (e.g., tofu, tempeh, or natto).

Animal products are discouraged on the macrobiotic diet. The primary forms of protein allowed are fish or seafood. Other meats, poultry, eggs and dairy are to be avoided. Thus, this diet will not appeal to the carnivore. Interestingly, the fish and seafood is to be eaten with horseradish, wasabi, ginger, mustard, or daikon (radish). The claim is that these items are combined to help detoxify the body from the effects of the fish and seafood. To date, there is no scientific study that supports this.

Seeds and nuts are promoted in moderation. Seeds and nuts can be lightly roasted and slightly salted. Fruits, such as apples, pears, peaches, apricots, grapes, berries, melons, can be consumed several times a week. Tropical fruits are generally avoided. These fruits are claimed to be very yin in nature and any food that is too yin or too yang should be avoided. Desserts are permitted, but in moderation, no more than 2-3 times per week. Desserts of choice are naturally sweetened foods such as fruits. Refined and simple sugar such as honey, table sugar, molasses, chocolate, and carob are avoided. Unrefined oils are allowed, such as dark sesame oil. Aside from the shoyu and sea salt, other condiments allowed are umeboshi vinegar, umeboshi plums (pickled plums), ginger, fermented pickles, gomashio (roasted sesame seeds), roasted seaweed, and scallions. Not surprisingly, all foods, especially fruits and vegetables, consumed should be seasonal and locally and organically grown. For most Americans, this means no more bananas, pineapple, and mangos. Vitamin or mineral supplements are not recommended and followers are to avoid highly processed foods. Therefore, the diet is very prescribed and to many extents, very difficult to follow.

Not only is the diet restrictive, the macrobiotic lifestyle is also clearly defined. Food is considered sacred and therefore must be prepared with care and in a peaceful setting. Methods of preparing vegetables are mentioned above. Followers are advised not to use the microwave oven or any other electronics. Rice should be cooked in a pressure cooker. The reason is to promote the intake of food in the most natural state possible. Cookware and utensils should be made from wood, glass, ceramic, stainless steel or enameled pieces. In addition, people should only eat when they are hungry. When they do eat, they must chew their food completely (e.g., chew 50 times or until the food becomes liquid in the mouth—this is a long time). The theory is that all the chewing will aid the digestion process. They are instructed to eat in an orderly, relaxed manner while practicing good posture. They are also advised to keep their home in good order. In addition, followers are told to avoid wearing synthetic or woolen clothing, at least in direct contact with their skin. It is suggested they avoid long hot baths or showers as this could cause an imbalance to the yin and yang. The Kushi Institute also recommends that living spaces should be filled with large green plants to increase the oxygen content in the surroundings. Lastly, Kushi advises that followers should sing a happy song on a daily basis. In summary, live stress free...shouldn't we all?

What are the dietary merits of the macrobiotic diet? The emphasis on plant foods is promising. Plants contain phytochemicals that are also antioxidants. These substances have been shown to reduce the risk for heart disease and certain cancers. Certain recommended plant foods, such as soy, is also high in phytoestrogen. Phytoestrogen has been shown to lower women's risk for breast cancer and

endometriosis as well as other symptoms of menopause. Plant foods also contain dietary fiber. Fiber has been shown to keep the colon healthy and also lower blood cholesterol level—further lowering the risk for heart disease. The diet stresses eating only what is needed and only when hungry. This prevents the urge to overeat and minimizes the risk for weight gain and obesity. Thus, the risk for obesity related chronic diseases (high blood pressure, type II diabetes, certain cancer, heart disease, and stroke) is also lowered.

Since this diet is so restrictive, it brings to light the importance of nutrition and diet to a person's overall health. As a result, the individual on the macrobiotic plan will be more conscious of what he/she eats and practice healthier behaviors. Because of these potential benefits, macrobiotic diets are very appealing to those diagnosed with chronic diseases such as cancer. Unfortunately, research has not supported the macrobiotic diet as a cure for cancer. The American Cancer Society has announced that they have found no evidence that patients on a macrobiotic diet are more apt to be cured of cancer. As such, the macrobiotic diet should not be used as form of treatment.

Because of the restrictive nature of the diet, it is also limiting in certain vitamins and minerals. The diet is deficient in vitamin B12, iron, magnesium, calcium as well as protein and calories. Research has shown that children on the macrobiotic diet can suffer from retarded growth, muscle wasting, and slower psychomotor development due to nutrient and energy deficiencies.

- **Vitamin B12** is necessary for converting folate in the synthesis of DNA and blood cells. In addition, vitamin B12 is also responsible for maintaining the myelin sheath, the protective coating that surrounds every nerve fiber. Without it, nerve cells would be permanently destroyed. Foods rich in vitamin B12 are found in meat and animal products which are to be avoided on the macrobiotic diet. The limited amount of fish and seafood allowed is not enough to meet the body's need for vitamin B12.
- **Iron** is needed to transport oxygen to all of the body cells. Iron also assists the body in multiple ways, including muscle function, immune function and brain function. Since iron is typically found in red meat and other meat sources, and meat is sorely missing from the macrobiotic diet, a vegetarian must consume a much larger quantity of enriched grains and fortified cereal along with vitamin C to absorb an adequate level of iron from plant foods.
- **Magnesium** is also needed in the body for hundreds of reactions such as DNA and protein synthesis, muscle contraction, blood clotting and energy production. Without magnesium, much of the cellular activities will not occur and the heart rhythm is disrupted. Although many of the grains and beans called for in the diet contain a good source of magnesium, the high fiber consumed could hinder the body's ability to absorb magnesium from the foods.
- **Calcium** is needed for bone health as well as muscle contraction and blood clotting. Dairy products are the best sources of calcium. Dark leafy greens also contain some calcium; however, these greens also contain oxalate that interferes with the body's ability to fully absorb this calcium. Some soy products and orange juice are fortified with calcium, however macrobiotic followers may have to bend

the rules since these products may be considered processed and may not be “locally and organically grown”.

The macrobiotic diet has many benefits, primarily encouraging the followers to live a stress free life and eat simplistic, mainly grain-based foods. However, it also has its limitations. The ability to live stress free is beyond the scope of any diet. Perhaps, just the progress towards a more stress free life can benefit anyone. The diet itself is very limiting and difficult to follow for the average individual. Some of the food items allowed can only be found in specialty stores. From that aspect, it contradicts one of its own macrobiotic principles of eating foods that are “seasonal and locally and organically grown”.

There are also “flexitarian” types of the macrobiotic diet which are variations of the restrictive and traditional one. Most proponents of the flexible macrobiotic diets allow the intake of other foods but typically discourage the intake of dairy products, meat, refined sugars, eggs, coffee, sugar, stimulants (e.g., caffeine), aromatic herbs, and processed foods. These diets can also be adjusted based on the individual’s age, gender, level of physical activity and climate.

So why are celebrities sold on this diet? Remember, it’s more than just a diet, incorporating a philosophical as well as spiritual belief. The restrictive nature of the diet correlates with a self purification process. After years of eating on the road or overindulging, it may seem appealing to simplify and be rid of the excess. In addition, the macrobiotic philosophy of eating only when hungry, chewing foods until it turns to liquid, and the blandness of the foods allowed are enough to stop a person from overeating. Therefore, a natural consequence of the macrobiotic diet is weight loss. Now who doesn’t like a diet that also promotes weight loss? As I’ve always said, a *diet* is a four letter word until you can add to it and somehow change it into a *lifestyle*. The macrobiotic philosophy expands beyond the foods and incorporates strict rules on how to live. This may be appealing to some. For me, I’ll stick with a lifestyle of eating many different foods in moderation and exercising regularly.

Resources:

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