

Eat like your Abuelos

14 NOVEMBER / 2018



Have you noticed how many illnesses are connected to what and how we eat? It can be overwhelming sometimes. Every time you turn around, there's some other diet you should be on. Eat that. Don't eat that. It's enough to make you un poco loca.

But here's some encouraging news. Researchers are finding out some things that many of us already know. Our grandparents and great-grandparents had a healthier lifestyle than we do, and that's a fact.

Take my Papa Pepe for instance, my dad's father, who immigrated from Spain. Wiry little dude walked everywhere! If he weighed 135 pounds, he weighed too much. Swore that the onion he chomped on and the copious amount of garlic that my abuela cooked with kept him young and nimble even when the arthritis caught up with him in his 70s. We have an old cane of his that has a black mark on the inside of the curve of the cane, and that was from jumping on the bus.

He used to run up to the bus and hook his cane around the door handle and hoist himself up the bus steps without missing a beat.

I remember he bragged about his eating habits. "I eat breakfast, I eat lunch, I eat dinner. ¡Y, Ya!

The big meal in those days, and still today in Spain and Latin America, was lunch. And that was paired up with a nice nap. La hora de la comida, which is what we called it at home, started with soup, then a second dish mostly consisting of a small portion chicken, fish or meat and veggies. Dessert was usually a cup of flan or fruit, or even 2-3 galletitas, usually Mariás. Small portions but with a lot of variety.

The soups were basic and traditional like cocido, which is made up of lots of veggies and very little meat. This was my Papa Pepe's favorite. But there were also the caldillos. Ours were usually made with chopped fresh tomato, garlic, onion and green chile with small bits of lean beef and cubed potatoes. Meat was expensive then, so the meat portions were always small. A chuleta (pork chop) was thin cut and no bigger than the palm of your hand. The side dishes were veggies such as calabacitas, green beans, or a cucumber salad. ¡Un pan! (One piece of bread)

Dinner was lighter than lunch. Some leftovers from lunch perhaps, or a lentil stew with carrots and onions, or even a simple bowl of frijoles de la olla. Sometimes we had chorizo con papas, scrambled up with some eggs. This was a bit heavier, but again, the portions were small, so we could enjoy it without excess. ¡Chiquito pero sabroso! (Small but tasty.)

You can eat a great variety of foods when you eat small portions. "¡Es provete, no traguate!" is one of my favorite dichos related to eating. (It translates to: it's a taste, not a gorge.) So even a traditional chorizo, which has more fat than a regular cut of lean meat, in small amounts, is delicious. Todo en moderación. (Everything in moderation.)

Papá Pepe was anti-chuchulucos. Now there's a word for your dictionary! CHUCHULUCOS. (Mostly refers to the sweet stuff, like candy, churros, pies, pan dulce, cakes, etc.) He never touched the stuff.

So my abuelo ate three meals with no snacks in between; never ate sugar, except maybe in his café con leche, walked everywhere he could, and worked from sun up to sun down. Lived to be 90.

But life has changed. Now we supersize our meals. We use food as a stress management tool and snack for entertainment purposes. The crunchier, the fattier, the more addicting, the more we like it. We sit in our cars, sit in front of our desks, plop down in front of some kind of screen for hours every day and weigh much more than our grandparents did.

One of the most interesting lectures I ever attended as a health educator was years ago from Dr. David Hayes Bautista, a Professor of Medicine and Director of the Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture at the School of Medicine at UCLA.

He cautioned that "Assimilation could be hazardous to our health," and it was all about how

Mexican immigrants were healthier when they got here than when they had lived here for a few years. Current research from UCLA also shows that as Mexican immigrants spend more time in this country, their health physical and mental health deteriorates.

The basic traditional Mexican diet consists of corn tortillas, beans, fresh vegetables like tomato, avocado, chiles and onions, and some fruit. Traditional Mexican life included walking as a means of transportation and working hard.

Once we gave up walking as a mode of transportation, changed our traditional lifestyles from working on farms and ranches or even subsistent farming like growing our own food and tending to our orchards, gardens and chickens, we also started eating larger portions and more processed foods with lots more fat, sodium and sugar.

Modern North American life has not been kind to our health. Along with eating more processed and fast foods, came the convenience and affordability of cars. These changes make our lives easier but also carry unintended consequences. (Para cada solución hay un problema.)

We eat more poorly and are less active than our grandparents, and our poor bodies just started slowing down and wearing out.

It's not rocket science, Comadres. But there you have it.

There's an old dicho that you might have heard: "Lo que no mata engorda." The equivalent of - "If it doesn't kill you, it will make you fatter." Now, a more appropriate dicho for our times may be, "Lo que te engorda, te puede matar," - "That which makes you fat may kill you."

Unfortunately, I speak from experience. I just found out that I have prediabetes again. I had been diagnosed with prediabetes many years ago and that is when I started biking every day and cutting back on carbs and fat. I lost the magical 5%-7% of my body weight, and the prediabetes went away. It worked for me for over 10 years.

Recently, I gained some weight, and sure enough, I am back in the prediabetes range. Now let me tell you that I haven't changed my mind about having diabetes. I do not want diabetes, and I am going to do what I can to prevent or delay it.

So, I am going to channel Papá Pepe and start going back to a more traditional way of eating. I'm cutting back on portion sizes and do more walking.

I always thought that I did plenty of exercise. I ride my bike every day, come rain or shine, but I also confess that I've been riding to a French Café. So, I'm bailing on the croissant and switching to whole grain toast.

When my Viejo takes our giant dog for a walk in the morning, I'm getting up and going with them even if it means going in my PJ's. (I'm in Portland right now and people shop in their pajamas here, so I'm cool.)

I'm using our De Las Mías Healthy Lifestyle Checklist and calling my Comadre, best friend and sister, test kitchen chef, extra-ordinaire, and Silver Sneaker maniac to report in.

No more CHUCHULUCOS for me and that means, not eating those sour ginger candies I get at the corner store! BUMMER! Okay, well maybe just a few on the week end! ¡Poquitos porque son benditos!

I'm going to practice what I preach and let you know how it goes. In 6 months, if I lose 5%-7% of my weight, I should be under the Pre-diabetes range again.

For now, I'm going to take it easy, be kind to myself, love my body, treat it well, and make it last.

I'm signing off now to take my bici to Petite Provence, to eat my whole grain toast with an egg for protein and to enjoy the fall colors.

¡Hasta la vista!

Sources:

Gordon, Dan. [Life in America: Hazardous to immigrants' health?](#) December 01, 2014

Pérez-Escamilla. Acculturation, nutrition, and health disparities in Latinos. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. 2011;93(suppl):1163S-7S. 2011 American Society for Nutrition