



Is Fruit Healthy?

The idea that fruit is a health-giving food, or even that eating fruit is actually necessary for good health, is firmly entrenched in current dietary dogma. We're told that we must eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily for good health, with some recommendations going as high as 10 servings. But is fruit healthy, and do we really need to eat it for good health? Several considerations could lead us to an answer in the negative.

What our ancestors ate

Any consideration of whether a particular food or certain quantities of that food are beneficial for health necessarily depends on whether humans evolved to eat it. While some primates, to whom humans are related, eat lots of fruit, humans have evolved independently for a couple of million years or so, depending on how "human" is defined.

Hunter-gatherers are those groups of people that live without agriculture, and researchers have studied them and their diets extensively.

Since the origins of agriculture around 10,000 years ago, agriculturalists have pushed hunter-gatherer groups into more marginal areas, so how close the contemporary hunter-gatherer diet and lifestyle is to that of our paleolithic ancestors is an open question.

With that caveat in mind, contemporary hunter-gatherers consume a diet in which, on average, [meat provides 65% of calories](#), the rest coming from plant foods. Our paleolithic ancestors may have consumed even greater amounts of meat, since they didn't live on marginal land, the human population of the world was small, and [many more large, wild animals roamed](#).

Did they eat fruit, and are humans adapted to eating it? Modern fruit consumption is based on agriculture and preservation, such as canning or refrigeration, and those certainly didn't exist in the paleolithic era, so it's a good assumption that if they did eat fruit, they would not have eaten nearly as high a quantity of it as modern people.

Paleolithic fruit eating could have taken the form of gorging on it when it was abundant and meat was scarce, in which case, fruit wouldn't have been available year-round as it is for us moderns.

I've lived in the tropics myself, and virtually the only fruit I saw people there eat was mangoes. Mangoes ripen over the space of a few weeks and if not eaten then, fall to the ground and rot, so for a few weeks time, everyone eats mangoes like they're going out of style – which they are, in a sense.

Optimal foraging theory

[Optimal foraging theory](#) applies economics to an animal's acquisition of food. Like any other economic good, time and energy must be used to acquire food, and an animal attempts to spend the least time and energy for the most reward, or the greatest return on investment.

It seems that in most cases, optimal foraging theory points to meat as the preferred food of humans, since it is high in calories and protein. Fruit is not. A single large animal could feed a group of humans for days, while a lot of fruit would have to be gathered to feed the same number of people, arguably entailing a lot more work. Even then, fruit wouldn't provide enough necessary protein, assuming that enough fruit could be gathered, which seems unlikely except perhaps sporadically. Golden Delicious apples didn't grow in groves back then.

So, both theory and evidence point towards the consumption of large amounts of meat during the Paleolithic era. Nevertheless, humans probably ate fruit when necessary, when they were hungry, no meat was to be had, and fruit was available.

But what was that fruit like?

Wild vs domestic fruit

These are wild bananas:



They're much smaller and contain less edible material than modern bananas, which have been bred to have high sugar content.

[One modern banana](#) provides about 105 calories, of which almost all comes from sugars. It provides only 1 gram of protein. And, since bananas are grown, shipped, and stored using industrial technology, we can eat as many bananas as we like.

If sugar is bad for us, it doesn't seem likely that just because it's in a banana, it's good.

The same considerations apply to other fruits: modern fruit is larger and contains more sugar because it's been bred to be so, and it's grown using modern methods resulting in abundant output, and then transported from the tropics or other areas to the point of purchase. In paleolithic times, none of that applied.

Modern era

What about more recent eras, such as the 18th or 19th centuries? Obesity and other diseases of civilization were uncommon then, and if people ate much fruit, then perhaps we could say that fruit was healthy, or at least benign.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, [Americans did not eat very much in the way of fruits and vegetables](#). Meat was abundant, and even the poor ate plenty of it. Fruits and vegetables had a short growing season and were ripe for only a short period of time, and in the absence of refrigeration and transport, spoiled, as Nina Teicholz writes:

Even in the warmer months, fruit and salad were avoided, for fear of cholera. (Only with the Civil War did the canning industry flourish, and then only for a handful of vegetables, the most common of which were sweet corn, tomatoes, and peas.)

So it would be “incorrect to describe Americans as great eaters of either [fruits or vegetables],” [wrote](#) the historians Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont. Although a vegetarian movement did establish itself in the United States by 1870, the general mistrust of these fresh foods, which spoiled so easily and could carry disease, did not dissipate until after World War I, with the advent of the home refrigerator. By these accounts, for the first 250 years of American history, the entire nation would have earned a failing grade according to our modern mainstream nutritional advice.

What about apples – fruit, obviously – didn’t Americans eat them? Johnny Appleseed is famous for spreading apple trees around the country. But it turns out that [much of the apple crop was turned into apple cider](#). Not only did cider provide alcohol, but it’s a way to preserve and concentrate apples in the absence of refrigeration and transport.

Sugar

Modern fruit is typically loaded with sugar, although there are some exceptions. As noted above, bananas are sweet, with about 93% of calories as carbohydrates, most of that sugar. [Apples](#) are similar in composition, as are [pears](#).

Even if it is argued that fruit contains protective or beneficial elements, which may be true, all that sugar does little good other than as an energy source, and energy sources are not in short supply these days. Fruit is a poor source of protein as well.

Berries are somewhat of an exception, with [raspberries for instance containing about 33% sugar as calories](#). Avocados are low in sugar as well, although they don’t usually spring to mind when most people think of fruit.

Modern fruits are big bags of sugar, having been bred to be that way. If we avoid sugar in other forms, it seems odd that sugar would be beneficial just because it’s in fruit. Sugar is a huge net negative for fruit in my opinion.

Phytochemicals and hormesis

Fruits (and vegetables) are thought to be healthy due to the phytochemicals, largely polyphenols, that they contain. Phytochemicals in turn may be beneficial because they stimulate [hormesis](#), the process in which low doses of a toxin or other stress produce beneficial changes in our bodies.

However, [coffee, tea, red wine, and chocolate](#) all generally provide far more polyphenols than fruit. With the exception of chocolate, they have the added

benefit of being entirely sugar-free, and even chocolate can be consumed without sugar or in low-sugar forms such as dark chocolate. So, if you want to consume polyphenols, and you consume coffee, etc., then fruit would be superfluous.

Teeth

Sugar rots teeth, and as we've seen, most fruit is loaded with sugar.

It could be argued, and I do argue, that any food that rots teeth isn't meant for human consumption, that we have not evolved to consume it and remain healthy. Mainstream health authorities mostly deny this. But rotten teeth can be a serious health problem if untreated, leading to abscesses, pain, even death from septicemia, so evolution would certainly select for the ability to maintain healthy teeth. The fact that we can't maintain healthy teeth today absent specialized care and treatment speaks volumes for the suitability of our food.

[Fruit juice may be especially harmful in this regard](#), and [it's harmful in more ways than that](#).

Fiber

Fruit has lots of fiber. Don't we need that?

Not really; in any case, [it's highly overrated](#).

Vitamin C

One of the few vitamins in which animal foods are relatively low is vitamin C, and fruits do contain vitamin C. However, a number of vegetables, such as red chili pepper and broccoli, [contain more vitamin C than oranges](#). So it's not necessary to consume fruit to get abundant vitamin C. Besides vitamin C, fruit contains little in the way of other vitamins and minerals that can't be found more abundantly elsewhere.

Summary

Humans likely did not evolve to eat much fruit, certainly not year round and not in the abundance that we do today. Further, whatever fruit that early humans did eat was lower in sugar than modern fruit.

Even in the modern era, it wasn't until after World War I and the spread of modern refrigeration that people ate lots of fruit. Before that, fruit was seasonal and much of it (apples) was used to make alcohol.

Modern fruit is loaded with sugar, is low in protein, and appears to provide not a lot of added benefit compared to other foods.

Fruit isn't necessary or even particularly beneficial, and certain aspects of it could be harmful. I rarely eat it.

PS: A healthier thing to rather than eating fruit is [Dumping Iron](#).



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