NOVEMBER 12, 2024 / A LIVE-FOREVER DIET?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL: Today on the show we ask: can a diet help us live much, much longer? We do know that someone will always be trying.

NOEL: There’s venture capitalist Bryan Johnson’s vegetables for breakfast.

*<CLIP> BRYAN JOHNSON: This is freshly made with broccoli, cauliflower, black lentils, garlic, ginger hemp seeds and one tablespoon extra virgin olive oil.*

NOEL: There’s David Murdoch, the 101-year-old chairman of Dole Foods’ and his somewhat bizarre fruit-forward diet

*<CLIP> DAVID MURDOCH: I eat the skins of bananas, the skins of oranges, the skins of pineapple.*

Noel: There’s the Blue Zone diets - taken from places in the world where people are said to routinely live to 100.

*<CLIP> DAN BEUTTNER: The five pillars of every longevity diet in the world are whole grains, greens, tubers like sweet potatoes, nuts and beans.*

NOEL: And then there’s the possibility – that this is … a lot of nonsense. Coming up on Today, Explained.

[THEME]

NOEL TRACKS: Anahad O’Connor is a nutrition reporter for the Washington Post’s Well Being Desk. He’s been writing about food and health for more than two decades. Anahad, for maybe ten, fifteen years we’ve heard about like tech guys in Silicon Valley trying to hack their health and live forever. When did human beings start thinking diet equals health and health equals longevity?

ANAHAD: So I think this probably goes back to the dawn of our species.   
  
NOEL: oooh!

<SCORING IN> World\_To\_Come\_APM

ANAHAD: Throughout the centuries, there have always been diet and health gurus and doctors who promoted different foods. So human beings have always known instinctively that there's some connection between what we eat and how we feel and how healthy we are. That goes back at least thousands of years, if not longer.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: At least thousands of years, so it is not 10 to 15 years, and in the Bay Area, I was wrong about that.   
  
ANAHAD: <chuckles>

NOEL: Tell me about some of the the kind of luminaries or the people that we've chosen to follow over the years when they tell us what we should eat.

ANAHAD: We know in the United States that certainly throughout the past century there have been diet gurus who promoted things like the low carb diet, and the Paleo diet, and the South Beach diet, uh, the low fat diet. These often start with people, sometimes doctors, sometimes just, you know, everyday people who decide that they know, you know, the foods or the diet that are going to help us live a longer, healthier life. And the interesting thing is that I started researching this years ago, and I noticed that a lot of these diet gurus actually tend to die prematurely.   
  
NOEL: oh!

ANAHAD: So you look, for example, there was a famous guy named Jerome Rodale, and you might recognize that last name. He helped to pioneer the organic food movement in the United States in the 50s, 60s and 70s, and promoted the idea that organic foods are going to make you healthier, help you live longer. He famously went on The Dick Cavett Show in the early 70s and was bragging about how healthy he was because of his diet and told Dick Cavett he was going to live to be 100 and was, you know, saying that he had just fallen down a flight of stairs and he laughed all the way down <chuckle>  
  
NOEL: <laughs>

ANAHAD: as he was falling down the stairs. You know, he was 72 at the time. And he said, I'm going to live to be 100 unless I'm, quote unquote, run down by some sugar crazed taxi driver. And Cavett was really enamored of this. And then they go to break. And then they heard Jerome Rodale, who was sitting on a couch next to him, make a sort of snoring sound.   
NOEL: <gasp>

ANAHAD: It turns out he had had a heart attack right there on the couch moments after bragging…  
  
NOEL: <laughs>

ANAHAD: …about how he was going to live to 100 and died, sadly. But that show never aired for obvious reasons.

NOEL: Let's talk about some of the other diets that we hear a lot about these days that we're told will help us live longer, if not forever. What springs to the top of your mind?

ANAHAD: So there are so many nowadays. And I think there's something special about this idea that your diet can improve your health because people find it very empowering. And we know there's this connection between food and your health. And if you just make the right choices, then you will, you know, hit the, you know, longevity lottery.

<SCORING IN> Parts\_in\_Motion\_\_a\_\_APM

ANAHAD: And so the popular diets today would be - certainly, the keto diet, which is the diet that Atkins famously promoted.

*<CLIP> TODAY:*

*REPORTER: It’s been around actually a long time. The medical version of Keto has actually been around 100 years.*

ANAHAD: It's very low carb, tends to be very high in fat and also protein.

*<CLIP> MEGYN KELLY TODAY*

*GUEST: Breakfast for example is eggs, avocado, bacon or sausage things like that.*

ANAHAD: There's the vegan diet, which of course is no animal based foods. It's all plant based foods. There is the paleo diet, which supposedly is the diet that our ancestors ate. And so people who follow his diet think, well, these are the foods that we evolved to eat. So we just eat these foods and avoid the processed foods and the packaged foods that there are today, then you'll be healthier.

*<CLIP> TASTED:*

*HOST: Get in touch with the caveman inside. A Paleolithic diet seriously reduces your risk for diabetes.*

ANAHAD: Intermittent fasting…  
  
NOEL: mmm!

ANAHAD: has been a very big diet trend, very buzzy, something that a lot of people here in the tech community in the Bay Area love to follow.

*<CLIP> MEGYN KELLY TODAY*

*MEGYN KELLY: Now some experts say this helps consumers take in fewer calories, lowers your blood pressure, improves glucose levels, and even slows down the aging process.*

ANAHAD: There's also low calorie diets.

*<SPLENDA CLIP> Make delicious recipes that are lighter in calories and added sugar.*

*<WEIGHT WATCHERS CLIP> Weight watchers easy 123 success is a different story. Eat any food you crave…*

*<SLIM FAST CLIP> The slim fast plan can live up to its pledge because each shake is a delicious, nutritious low-calorie meal.*

ANAHAD: A big buzzword in the diet space today is ultra processed foods. And these are the packaged foods with lots of additives and, you know, sugar and fat and artificial colors and flavorings. And a lot of nutrition researchers think if we just avoid these foods, we'll all be much healthier. These are the foods that are actually killing us.

*<CLIP> NPR: DR. JEFF MEYERHARDT: One mechanism of how ultra processed food can be associated with colorectal cancer is again through leading to increasing weight, increasing risk of diabetes, and other metabolic syndrome factors closely tied to colorectal cancer.*

*<CLIP> BBC: In the last decade, the evidence has been slowly growing that ultra processed food is harmful for us in ways we hadn't thought.*

ANAHAD: So there's, there's lots of different diets and approaches to this.

NOEL: Our listeners will know that about a year ago, I got really obsessed with ultra processed foods. We did an episode. I was refusing to buy bread from the supermarket. I was insisting <laughing> that I make it at home.

ANAHAD: <laughs> That is really hard to do..  
  
NOEL: And it went on– That went on for maybe three months. Four months? Five months. I gave it up. This morning I was in a crappy mood and I ate a Snickers bar like literally 6 a.m..

ANAHAD: <laughs>

NOEL: So. So. So which diet are you on?

ANAHAD: I tend to follow a diet where I get a lot of whole foods. I try to avoid ultra processed foods, but. But not always. I also have two little kids…

NOEL: <chuckles>

ANAHAD: so they tend to dictate our shopping and purchasing patterns. But I try to eat foods that are high in protein because I know that promotes satiety. Also helps to promote weight loss, generally good for your health. Avoid the ultra processed foods with lots of additives and high in sugar and fat and salt and try to eat sort of a mediterranean kind of diet, a diet that has a lot of unsaturated fats. So things like olive oil, nuts, seeds, seafood. I like fermented foods like yogurt and kimchi and sauerkraut, because these foods have probiotics, which are the friendly bacteria that help your gut microbiome. And that also plays a role in promoting good health.   
  
NOEL: Have you heard of blue zones?

ANAHAD: Absolutely. Blue zones have been very influential in the nutrition and lifestyle medicine space. So the idea behind blue zones is that these are sort of pockets around the world where people have an unusually long lifespan compared to others. And it's thought that this is because of the different lifestyle habits they follow.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR: DAN BUETTNER: People in Blue Zones are living a long time because they’re socializing. Because they know their purpose, and they live their purpose. They live near nature. They keep their family close by. And we can map all of these to higher life expectancy.*

ANAHAD: the diets they follow, which are supposedly plant-based, with lots of fiber, lots of unsaturated fats, very little red meat, supposedly, according to the Blue Zones book. But this idea has become really controversial lately, and there's some accusations that it's basically a mirage.

NOEL: We're going to talk about those accusations later in the show. But what seems to be at the heart of the skepticism about any of these diets is that diet research does not seem that trustworthy. We hear that something is really bad for us and then we hear, no, it's it's fine for us. Remember, the I guess it's this has been playing out over the last year or so. But remember, we were all told that like, a glass of wine is great for you.

ANAHAD: Mhmm, yea.

NOEL: And we learned, no, actually, we don't think it is. Why is the research into what we eat and drink and how it affects our health–why is it so dicey?

ANAHAD: Gosh, it's because nutrition science is so hard to do. Because if you want to do a study, for example, to answer this question: what is the diet that is going to help people live the longest? To do that study, you would have to recruit a large group of people, probably at least a thousand, 2000 people, split them into groups, ideally from a very young age and have them strictly follow different diets: a vegan diet, a mediterranean diet, a low carb diet, and just make sure they're eating all those specific foods. But we eat several times a day and we get cravings and we live in a world where there's so much food marketing and advertising, and we go to grocery stores where there are literally thousands and thousands of different food items we can buy. And so to do this study rigorously, you'd have to, you know, ideally actually give people the meals they're supposed to eat.You’d have to follow these people closely, make sure they're eating the foods. You have to look at their medical records. You have to follow them for years, if not decades, and see how these diets are impacting, you know, their lifespan. And that's just almost impossible.

NOEL: All right. So you've been covering food and health for 20 years. I've been reading articles like yours for 20 years. Surely, I would guess there is a new diet trend coming. Do you agree? And have you any idea what it is?

ANAHAD: It's really hard to predict what's going to be next. There's always something new. And people are so tantalized by these these diet gurus and health gurus who say, “Aha - I have found the secret.” I know the magic sauce. You know, if you just eat these foods, you'll be healthier, you'll live a longer life. I think people like having access to that special knowledge. It's very empowering.

<SCORING IN> World\_To\_Come\_APM

ANAHAD: And oftentimes they will go on these new diets and feel better and think, “Aha”. They start writing about it on on Twitter and on social media and putting out TikTok videos. I'm just eating this food. And look, I've lost weight. It's been amazing. But part of the reality is that almost any diet is going to be better than the standard American diet.   
  
NOEL: hmm

ANAHAD: So diet gurus are always point and say, look, these studies found that people lost this much weight on a vegan diet. These studies show that low-carb diet was better or these studies show that a paleo diet was so great for diabetes. Well, yeah, that's oftentimes because they're comparing this particular diet to the standard American diet that people are eating, which we know is terrible for you because we can see what's happened to obesity and chronic disease rates in the past, you know, four or five decades. So almost any diet you follow, that's not the standard American diet is going to be better for you.

NOEL: Anahad O’Connor. Washington Post. Coming up! The man who blew up the blue zones!

[BREAK]

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King. Dr. Saul Justin Newman is a researcher at the Oxford Institute for Population Aging at University College, London. He’s writing a book on - eep! - fraud and wishful thinking in aging research. And he says he found both in The Blue Zones.

NOEL: What is a Blue Zone?

SAUL: Well, the Blue Zone was originally claimed to be a region where people reached a remarkable age at a remarkable rate, and the usual cutoff that they provide is age 100. So the general idea is that somewhere in the world there are these remarkable regions where people reach age 100 at extraordinary rates.

*<CLIP> What if we could reverse engineer longevity? Well, I've spent the last 20 years trying to do just that. But instead of looking for answers in Petri dishes or test tubes, I've found five places around the world where people are getting the outcomes we want.*

NOEL: And where are they?

SAUL: Well, there were claimed to be, originally five. There was one in Costa Rica, one in Japan, one in Greece, one in America and one in Sardinia.

NOEL: Why are they said to reach the age of 100 in these places?

SAUL: Well, there are nine claims for lifestyle that go along with the Blue Zones, and they're sort of called the Power Nine. There's the idea that people move naturally, that they have a sort of life purpose, that they eat a lot of plants, that they drink, that they have a sense of belonging, that they put loved ones first, and that they have a sort of, what's called a right tribe, which is a bit of a vague definition, but the general idea is that they have a social circle.

NOEL: Who found them? Who popularized the idea of the Blue Zones?

SAUL: Yes, well Dan Buettner is…uh, a person who became famous for effectively riding their bicycle lots of interesting places and founding a company a marketing company off the back of that and he decided while he was cycling places for the National Geographic that he wanted to know about the secrets of longevity.

*<CLIP>  DAN BUETTNER: I never set out to be a longevity guru or fix America's healthcare system. I got here in a very unexpected way.*

SAUL: He read this paper about the Blue Zones in Sardinia and he went around applying that concept to a large number of places. He effectively had pitched this to National Geographic as a story and the story was wildly successful.

NOEL: And it makes sense, right? You open up your National Geographic, there's a story about these places in the world where people seem to live forever. You can see why it's popular. You're a researcher on aging. When did you start looking into blue zones?

SAUL: I started looking to Blue Zones when I had published a theoretical paper that effectively says most of our old age data in the world should be statistical junk. And then when I started to look at individual cases, I instantly found out that, the way that extreme age cases are validated is terrible. The world's oldest man was one of the first cases I investigated, and it turned out that he had three birthdays and no birth certificate.

NOEL: Huh!

SAUL: Yeah, it's remarkable. And he's still on the record books. Now, when I started digging deeper and deeper, I of course came across the Blue Zones. And at the time I had mapped more than 80 percent of the world's 110-year-olds. And what was striking is that those 110-year-olds were not falling in regions with good health, they were falling in regions that had terrible health. And surprisingly, that was the shared characteristic of most blue zones. I found that centenarians in the blue zones were missing or dead when the study was conducted. (A centenarian is someone who is a hundred years old or older.) I found that the health in the blue zones was poor before, during and after they were established. I found that none of the supposed lifestyle patterns that were happening in the blue zones were actually happening. And I found that pension fraud was absolutely rife throughout many of the blue zones. So that many of these people were collecting the pension from the graveyard, in effect, where they were getting older on paper, but they were already dead.

NOEL: When you discovered that the places in the world that were said to be Blue Zones were, had some pretty shoddy record keeping and may even have had some fraudulent record keeping, where did your mind go? What did you think?

SAUL: Well, I mean, I was shocked at the depth of this. You know, I was expecting that there were going to be errors. There were going to be problems. But this is like discovering that 82 percent of data from the Hubble Space Telescope is just dust on the lens.

NOEL: Huh.

SAUL: And this got even worse when I started looking at these power nine claims for lifestyle that was supposed to support this remarkable attainment of blue zone longevity.

NOEL: What did you find?

SAIL: Well, first case I investigated was Okinawa because Okinawa has – it's Japanese, and has beautiful surveys. And none of the power nine claims stood up to independent scrutiny. The central claim that people in Okinawa eat a lot of plants was nonsense. We have an extraordinary detail of people's diets in Okinawa going back to 1975. And they are dead last for root vegetable consumption, leafy vegetable consumption, pickled vegetable consumption. On the front page of the Netflix documentary is some purple sweet potatoes. Okinawa eats the least swerved purple sweet potato, or any sweet potato, in all of Japan, out of 47 prefectures. And they always have. So it's completely at odds with the characterization that's occurred in these cookbooks. The diet looks absolutely nothing like what's in the cookbooks.

NOEL: We do hear in a lot of news stories about Japanese people tending to live longer than other people. Is that wrong?

SAUL: On average, no. But the reason is much more simple. And that's that Japanese people are rich, they have universal health care, and have a generally healthy lifestyle. But in the details, this all falls apart, because Okinawa is the least healthy province. It has twice the poverty rate of any other region. They eat huge amounts of meat. Most of it is highly processed. Even the simple claims do not match the claims made by the Blue Zones people.

NOEL: Okay, so Okinawa, not looking good. Any of the other blue zones leap out at you as places where, oh boy, this is just not great.

SAUL: I mean, it's all not great. The American Blue Zone, Loma Linda. Dan Buettner has said that *The New York Times* - his editor at the magazine - has said you need to find an American Blue Zone. And so he's gone out and found Loma Linda. I should add, the CDC measures Loma Linda for life expectancy and it's pretty average, right? And at least a quarter of America lives longer than Loma Linda.

NOEL: We learned in the first half of the show that there are some things you can do, there are some ways in which you can eat that seem to extend your life. And they fall in line with what the blue zones seem to endorse. Limit your stress, eat whole foods, eat oatmeal, eat organic if you can. Are you taking issue with the fundamental idea that if people in Okinawa did eat the way the Blue Zone cookbook claims that they eat…

SAUL: What is going on here is that none of these recommendations bear any connection to the region's actual behaviors. Are they healthy? In some cases, of course. Sure, exercise is good for you. That's fine, but that's not because it looks like anything like what people do in these regions. So I think the takeaway there is that, yes, there are healthy behaviors, but this is not the person you should listen to for advice. If you wanna be healthy, go and talk to your gp. Don't listen to someone who's selling you a cookbook.

NOEL: All right. So if living in Okinawa or Loma Linda is not the key to living to a hundred, what is the key to a longer life? What do you think and what do you know?

SAUL: Well, I know that the CDC estimates this. Right, they, they estimate the life expectancy cost of different behaviors. And they're very simple. If you don't smoke, you'll gain seven years of life expectancy. And if you exercise, more is better, but generally four to six years. And those are the biggest, most important things you can do.

NOEL: Don't smoke. Exercise. You did not say anything about food.

SAUL: Food is a mess. We can't even decide if eggs are good for us after 50 years. I can't make any judgment on this because it's a mess. Uh, one striking thing about this is that Ansel Keys, who came up with the Mediterranean diet, he based the Mediterranean diet off the concept that people in southern Italy lived past 100 at remarkable rates. Now that that's not true, you know, you have to ask some questions.So yeah, when you ask me about diet, I don't know. Talk to your GP. That's really what it comes to, because your GP is not selling you anything. I hope to God (laugh).

NOEL: That was Dr. Saul Justin Newman of the Oxford Institute for Population Aging at University College, London.We reached out to Blue Zones LLC for comment about Dr. Newman’s claims and we did not hear back. In other publications, and on the Blue Zones website, Dan Beuttner disputes the claims that Dr. Newman makes. This episode was produced by Zachary Mack and Hady Mawajdeh, edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and engineered by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Patrick Boyd.Im Noel King and this is Today Explained.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]