Some 40,000 years ago is where we look for the roots of the Paleo Diet fad.

Based on the diets of our Paleolithic ancestors, the diet calls for meals made up of lean meats, veggies, fruits, and nuts. A diet very low in carbohydrates by today’s standards. There are no dairy products, refined sugars, legumes or even grains allowed.

Figuring what early man actually ate has not been easy. Scientists recognize that our early ancestor’s diets went through a profound change with the addition of meat.

But researchers propose that another addition to the menu was just as important: carbohydrates (to the frustration of paleo advocates). Scientists argue that by adding cooked starches into their diets, early man fueled the evolution of our oversized brains.

Seven million years ago, hominins (early humans) split off from apes and ate a diet high in raw, fiber-rich plants. Several million years later they started eating meat. Somewhere along the way they started cooking their meat.

Researchers have dated the remains of campfires dating back as far as 1.8 million years ago. Cooked meat provided more protein, fat, and energy that helped spur growth that allowed hominins to thrive.

Mark G. Thomas, an evolutionary geneticist, suggests that there was something else cooking on ancient fires: tubers and other starchy plants.

Cooking these starchy plants makes them 20 times easier for our bodies to digest. Our bodies convert this starch into fuel. This process starts in our mouth with chewing. Saliva contains the enzyme amylase that breaks down starchy food. Cooking wild tubers would have made them much more nutritious for human consumption.

DNA studies of our early ancestors show that people had extra copies of the amylase gene in pre-agricultural times. Thomas and his colleagues suggest that the advent of fire, not farming, caused the need for more amylase. Humans started cooking these starchy foods and needed more amylase to unlock the supply of glucose. This glucose was the fuel needed for bigger brains.

The type of carbs we eat today and those of our ancient ancestors are very different.

The modern diet tends to be represented by high calorie uptake, high glycemic load, high fat and meat intake, as well as an increased consumption of simple sugars like fructose.

The problem is that our bodies are not equipped to deal with such highly processed foods, and stores them as fat, causing health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

I think the conclusion is, contrary to the restrictions imposed by the paleo diet, that we do need carbohydrates in our diets. It’s all about learning to eat a clean diet that includes a healthy balance of carbs, fats, and proteins. America is caught up in unhealthy fad diets that are doomed to fail. A wise man once told me that if a diet has a name, then don’t do it. It’s not about dieting; it’s about living a healthy lifestyle and making wise lifestyle choices with the way we eat.

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