



GUELPH MERCURY

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You are what you eat

...but what the heck are we eating anyway?

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GUELPH

If research and reports were food, we'd be an even more obese nation, for we seem to gobble up information as quickly as scientists can churn it out.

And more than anything we eat up the latest research on food, to the point where words like 'trans-fat,' 'carbs' and 'polyunsaturated' have entered our consciousness, our conversations and our grocery lists.

And yet we are an obese nation. According to Statistics Canada nearly three million people are obese and more than six million between the ages of 20 and 64 are overweight.

"There's more nutrition information than ever and yet obesity is at its highest," said Mariza Robertson, a Guelph nutritionist, pointing out the irony. "Just because we know something doesn't mean we'll heed the advice."

While we must shoulder some of the blame for our portly physiques, the glut of information can be as confusing as it is enlightening. It's hard to know who to believe when research conflicts with, or out-and-out refutes, what has passed for common wisdom for years.

March is nutrition month — a good time to sift through the information and help decipher what's good, what needs more probing and what should be tossed.

"There is a lot of information out there," agreed Marg Hedley, a dietitian and assistant professor in the University of Guelph's department of family relations and applied nutrition.

"Some of it is accurate and some just speculation. The big question for the average person is once we have it, what do we do with it.

"That's the challenge — to take this information and apply it to daily living."

THE WONDER FOODS

A few years ago, when anti-oxidants and free radicals were the buzzwords, this top 10 list of wonder foods was widely circulated: green tea, spinach, garlic, oatmeal, salmon, blueberries, red wine, broccoli, tomatoes and nuts.

"It's a pretty good list," was Hedley's comment. "They are rich in anti-oxidants and phyto chemicals, which help prevent heart disease and cancer."

Free radicals occur in oxidation, when nutrients we eat are converted to oxygen. They can get into blood cells and do damage, Hedley said. Anti-oxidants prevent free radicals from forming.

Green tea, spinach, broccoli, blueberries and tomatoes are high in anti-oxidants, which is why they made the list. Brightly coloured fruits and vegetables are also rich in beta carotene, believed to have cancer-fighting properties.

Salmon contains Omega 3 fatty acid, which can keep blood clots from forming. Garlic is purported to help strengthen the immune system and oatmeal, high in fibre, helps reduce heart disease as well.

So should we concentrate on eating these foods?

Absolutely not, said Hedley.

"What you need is the right balance of foods," she said.

JACK SPRAT AND ALL THOSE FATS

Jack Sprat, the nursery rhyme goes, could eat no fat and his wife could eat no lean. So which of the two was healthier?

"Your body needs some fat," explained Jane Bellman, community dietitian at the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Health Unit. "No-fat diets are hard to stick with because you're always hungry. Plus, they're not very palatable."

That said, there are good fats and bad fats, Bellman explained. Saturated fats are animal fats, found in meat, butter and cream. They are not necessarily evil, Bellman said, just better if consumed in small quantities.

Polyunsaturated fats are found in oils, like safflower, sunflower and olive oil. These are the good guys, so when checking labels, like margarine for example, choose one made with polyunsaturated fats.

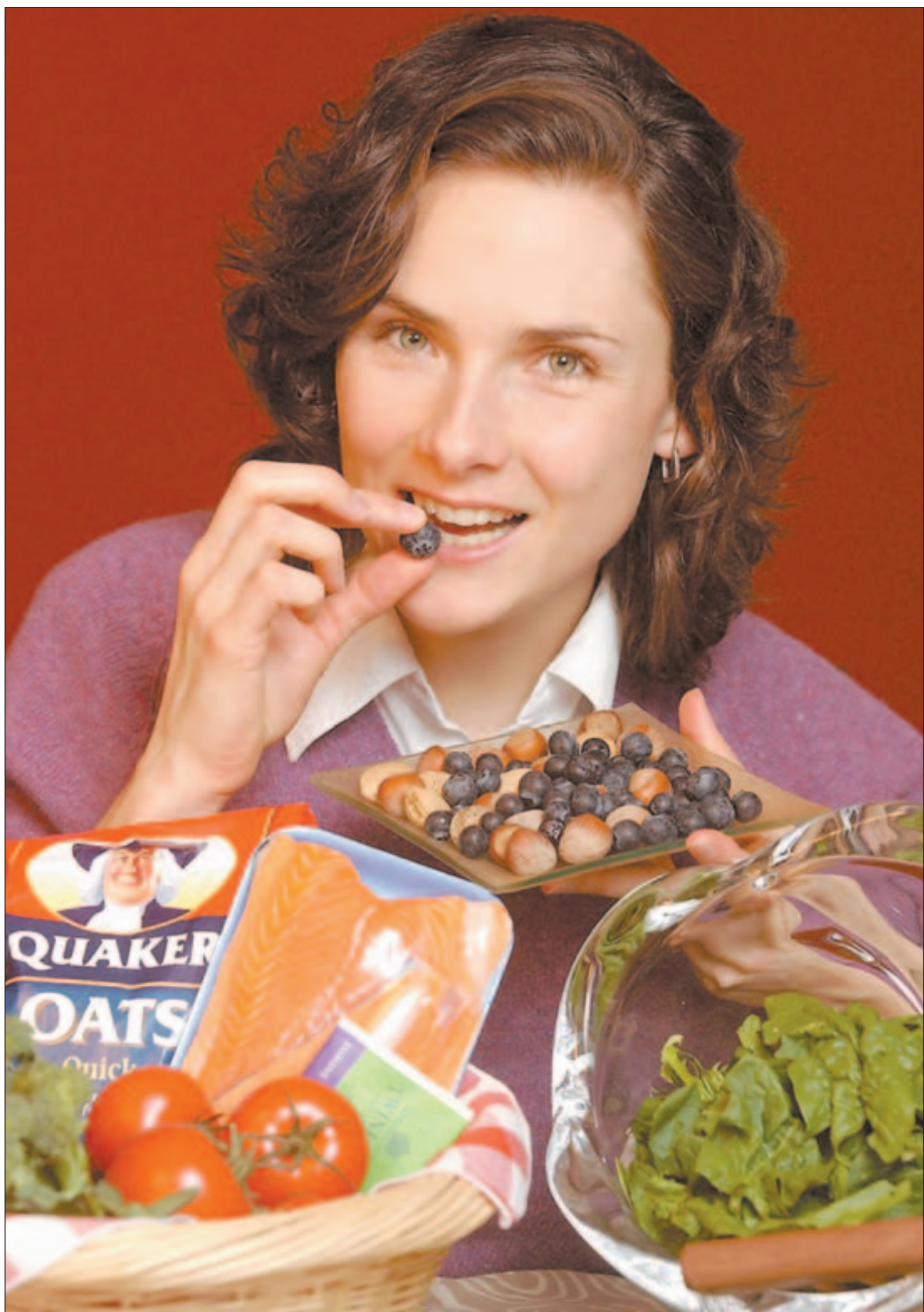
The big evils these days are trans-fats, which are found in processed foods, shortening and hydrogenated oil. Hydrogenation is the process used to turn liquid oil into a solid form.

Trans-fats can actually produce cholesterol in the liver as well as lower the amount of good cholesterol and raise the level of bad cholesterol in the body. An increase in cholesterol means a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, a leading cause of death in Canada.

"It shocked me to learn that trans-fats can cross into breast milk," said Heidi Smith, dietitian at the Health and Performance Centre at the University of Guelph. "Fats can start to clog arteries at a young age."

The food industry has taken note. Last month Frito Lay Canada announced it is eliminating trans-fat from Doritos, Tostitos and SunChips.

The company was already producing a variety of other products,



DAVE CARTER, GUELPH MERCURY

Heidi Smith, nutritionist with the University of Guelph's Health and Performance Centre, with the 10 wonder foods — green tea, spinach, garlic, oatmeal, salmon, blueberries, broccoli, tomatoes and nuts. The red wine isn't shown in photo.

including Lay's, Ruffles and Miss Vickie's chips, with non trans-fat cooking oils.

Pepperidge Farm announced it would eliminate trans-fats from its popular Goldfish crackers in response to consumer demands. And last fall, Voortman's, an Ontario-based cookie company, changed its recipes as well.

CARBOHYDRATES — THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Carbohydrates, when digested, become sugar in the bloodstream, sugar that gives the body energy to function. Simple carbs are very nearly sugar already: candy, syrup, frosted cereals and so on, "take no time to digest," explained Bellman at the local health unit.

Complex carbs have more fibre or starch and take longer to digest. Examples are whole wheat breads, brown rice, barley, grains, beans, peas and legumes.

Foods like potatoes, white rice, white bread and pasta fall between the two extremes, Bellman explained.

"Carbohydrates are good foods as long as we keep to our serving size. And watch what you put on them," she added. "For example, it's not the potato that's the problem, but the sour cream and butter that adds fat and calories."

GLYCEMIC INDEX — JUST A USEFUL TOOL

The glycemic index has been around for about 30 years but it's received new attention in recent months.

Smith at the Health and Performance Centre, explained the index was developed as a tool to help diabetics control their blood sugar levels. Volunteers were fed test foods and their blood sugar levels were measured three hours after eating.

"It's about the speed that blood sugar rises," Smith explained. Foods high on the index raise blood sugars quickly; low on the scale are foods that become sugar at a slower rate.

Plain sugar or glucose has a glycemic index rating of 100, the highest. All other foods are measured against that.

So it's not surprising that sugary breakfast cereals have a glycemic index of 90 and that more bland fare — bran cereals and granola for example — come in at 30.

And as quickly as it spikes, so too does blood sugar drop, leaving the individual feeling hungry again. The scale is a useful tool, Smith said, for choosing snack foods that will fill and sustain the stomach, rather than foods that fill, but only temporarily.

Mashed potatoes, parsnips and stuffing are all high on the index, Smith said, as are many Chinese food dishes, "Which explains why we're back in the kitchen an hour after Thanksgiving dinner."

TAKING A LOOK AT FOOD

This is the first of a three-part series on food where the Mercury will examine the facts, the foods, the fads, the foibles, the frustrations and yes, even a few helpful tips on healthy eating and success stories from which to draw inspiration. Next week: Looking at all those different diets.

Smith said avoiding foods that are high on the scale is not necessarily the secret to losing weight. With a glycemic index of 74, watermelon and carrots are relatively high on the scale, but they're still healthy foods.

WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT SALT?

Salt consumption has long been associated with high blood pressure, water retention and feeling bloated, but if you think you've eliminated it by tossing out the salt shaker, read a food label some time. "A tin of processed soup may contain as much as 1,000 grams of sodium," explain Smith. Dietitians recommend salt be limited to less than 800 mg of salt at a meal and under 500 mg for a snack.

CHOCOLATE — THE NEWS YOU WANT TO HEAR

We searched high and low to find someone with credentials who would justify keeping chocolate on the 'good food' list. As a result, Smith is now the best friend of chocolate-lovers everywhere.

"Somebody worked very hard to vindicate chocolate," Smith said with a laugh. "Chocolate doesn't have a lot of nutritional value, but there are anti-oxidants in chocolate — particularly in dark chocolate."

One study shows the type of chocolate used in M&M candies may have a protective effect, although it may be biased since it was conducted by M&M researchers.

Smith said chocolate loses its anti-oxidant qualities when ground into powder, like chocolate milk for example, and is best eaten as a solid.

Smith stressed that moderation is key. "A little bit is OK," she said, acknowledging the emotional properties of chocolate are as valuable as its nutritional ones.

"With chocolate, it comes down to quantity."

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DEFINITIONS:

A healthy weight is considered 18.5 to 24.9 BMI

Overweight — 25 to 29.9 BMI

Obese — 30 and up BMI

Body Mass Index (BMI) is weight in kilograms divided by height in metres squared. It doesn't take into account muscle tone or bone structure. To work out your BMI check the Web site www.dietitians.ca

GETTING MORE INFORMATION

Web sites

As confusing as the information about food is the misinformation. Arm yourself with reliable resources by credible experts and you can better judge the information, says Jane Bellman, community dietitian at the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Health Unit.

She offers the following Web sites as good, reliable sources of food and nutrition information.

www.HealthyOntario.com

Government of Ontario Web site with a ton of info about nutrition, the importance of healthy eating, a meal planner and more.

www.canadian-health-network.ca

Health Canada's Web site, click on 'healthy eating.'

www.dietitians.ca

Dietitians of Canada Web site has some interactive sites like the virtual kitchen, that guides the viewer through a well-stocked fridge and cupboards. You can check your body mass index (BMI) here.

www.nutrimundo.com

Web site maintained by accredited nutritionists who hope to enlighten the consumer to make informed choices about healthy lifestyles.