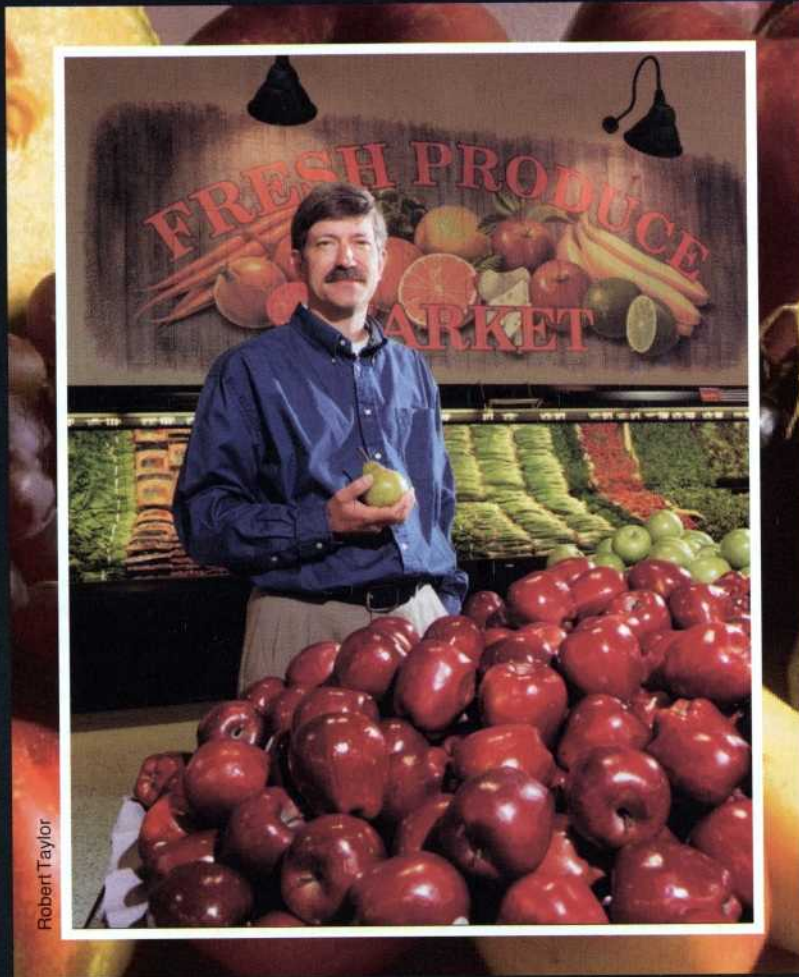


# STRAIGHT TALK

Dieters, read no further.  
There is no magic pill.  
Nonetheless, an OU nutritionist  
has words of wisdom  
that could change your life.

BY JUDITH WALL

OU Public Affairs



Robert Taylor

OU nutritionist Allen Knehans cannot stay away from the fresh produce aisles. Our mothers knew we should eat our fruits and vegetables, he insists, but somewhere along the way, we stopped listening to our mothers.

# ABOUT FOOD

**Allen Knehans is worried.**

In the 20 years since he earned a doctoral degree in biochemistry and began his teaching and research career in nutritional sciences, he has seen a steady decline in the quality of the American diet and a corresponding decline in our health and vigor.

And there does not seem to be any national desire to remedy the situation, he laments. In fact, we are exporting our unhealthy food habits to the rest of the world. *continued*

**K**nehans, a professor of nutritional sciences in the OU College of Allied Health, begins an interview about the state of the American diet by discussing the role of fruits and vegetables.

"I feel pretty passionately about them," he admits. "Our mothers were right. We really should eat our fruits and vegetables. I think our mothers intuitively knew that people were more healthy when they ate fruits and vegetables with every meal."

Somewhere along the way, however, we stopped listening to our mothers.

The latest research shows that we should be eating two or more servings of fruit every day and three or more servings of vegetables. Currently, Americans average less than one fruit a day.

"We're not even getting our morning glass of orange juice," Knehans points out.

As for vegetables, we eat slightly more than one per day. This figure represents a slight increase in recent years due to an increased consumption of potatoes, usually in the form of french fries, which have little nutritional value.

Yet, the health benefit of eating fruits and vegetables



and the nutrients found in fruits, vegetables and grains are therefore lacking. He points out that plants would not grow in the first place if there were no nutrients in the soil.

"We want to find out what is in food," he says, "so that we can put it in a pill or powder or liquid and not eat the food itself, but we don't know enough about food even

to begin thinking we can do that."

For example, about five years ago, research showed that people who ate yellow and orange fruits and vegetables have a lower risk for cancer. Researchers assumed that it was the beta carotene pigment in these foods that provided the protection. A well-known study to test this assumption was conducted on smokers, who are at higher risk for cancer than other population groups.

One group of smokers took a beta carotene pill every day; a second group got a placebo. The results were shocking, Knehans says. The group that took the beta carotene pill had a significantly higher incidence of cancer than those who took the placebo. Additional studies were stopped prematurely when researchers were forced to acknowledge that beta carotene pills were giving people cancer.

*How could that be?*

"Perhaps beta carotene is indeed the active health-giving ingredient in yellow and orange vegetables and fruits, but the studies didn't get the dose right," Knehans speculates. "Or perhaps for beta carotene to work, it needs to be accompanied by the other substances found in these foods. Maybe it wasn't the beta carotene in the first place but something else in them.

"We really don't know all the stuff that's in food," he reiterates. "To put individual nutrients in pills and think

it's okay to live on a diet of burgers and fries is not a good idea."

The OU nutritionist endorses the Food Guide Pyramid developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The food groups shown on the pyramid, when eaten in the recommended amounts with adequate variety, provide every nutrient a human being needs to be healthy.

Knehans rejects the idea that we need more vitamins, minerals or protein than provided by a balanced diet and warns that ingesting massive doses of these nutrients can cause health problems.

He also rejects the idea that successful weight reduction can be accomplished with a diet that is not balanced.

The current quick-fix diets—sugar busters, the zone, 40-30-30, the G-index—are variations of the original Dr. Atkins low-carbohydrate plan, he explains. All low-carbohydrate diets cause dehydration and rapid weight loss but seldom result in long-term success.

The reason people gain weight is simple: they eat more food than their body needs. However, losing weight and keeping it off is never simple.

"I don't know of a single expert on obesity who claims to have all the answers," Knehans says. "We know all the things that people are doing wrong, but doing it right over the

*"Our children are getting a whopping 46 percent of their energy intake from foods that have no nutritional value. They are living on soft drinks and packaged snack foods."*

(other than french fries) on a daily basis is absolutely undeniable.

"We know so much more now than we knew even five years ago," Knehans says. "We know that, without question, eating adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables lowers an individual's risk for cancer, heart disease and hypertension."

Recent research has shown, for example, that eating tomatoes on a regular basis lowers the risk for prostate and other cancers.

"And we now know that, for many individuals, reducing salt in the diet is not an effective way to prevent or treat hypertension," Knehans says. "The two dietary-related changes that most consistently reduce blood pressure are eating more fruits and vegetables and losing weight."

New studies continue to show that it is impossible to have a healthful diet without fruits and vegetables. And no, we cannot substitute a vitamin pill and achieve the same health benefits.

"Human beings evolved eating food," he says. "I don't know where the idea came from that we should stop getting our nourishment from food."

Knehans brands as ridiculous the argument put forward by food-supplement proponents that the world's soil is depleted,

long haul is very difficult.”

We live in an unhealthy culture, he explains. We live a sedentary lifestyle in front of televisions and computers. We eat most of our meals outside the home, and fast food and restaurant fare are frequently high in fat and short on nutrition. Making the right choices is becoming increasingly difficult.

And we are perpetuating the problem into the next generation by being terrible role models for our children.

Children see their parents select chips and candy bars over fruits and vegetables and drinking soda pop instead of milk or fruit juice. They see their parents driving around and around in parking lots in order to avoid a few steps.

“Our children are getting a whopping 46 percent of their energy intake from foods that have no nutritional value,” he says. “They are living on soft drinks and packaged snack foods.”

As a result, obesity and type II diabetes are becoming commonplace in children when 20 years ago they were almost unheard of.

It is not that Americans are not concerned about their weight and health, Knehans insists, but we are looking to quick fixes instead of long-term solutions.

“Everyone knows they should reduce fat and sugar in their diet, but we want food to taste the same way,” he says. “We want low-fat food that is made with Olestra so that it tastes the same and has the same texture as high-fat food. Or we want to take Xenical, which blocks the absorption of fat in our body.”

“We don’t want to make any changes in our diet. We want something that will allow us to eat the same and not pay the price, but no pill or drug is going to make us thin.”

Drugs have side effects, he warns. Clinical trials do not always reveal the risk associated with taking a drug. Thousands of people who took phen-fen now have permanent heart-valve damage that may shorten their lives.

“I would never recommend a drug for weight loss,” Knehans says. “For long-term effectiveness, people would have to take the drug for the rest of their lives. No one thinks about that. They think they can take the drug for a little while and cure their problem. But if they stop taking the drug, the weight will come back. Diet drugs don’t cure anything, and they can cause harm.”

He does not recommend dieting, either.

He tells about a national registry compiled by researcher



James Hill at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center. The registry lists people who have been able to lose 30 pounds or more and keep it off for more than a year. The two factors that most of these individuals have in common are:

- They get less than 30 percent of their calories from fat, with the average intake about 24 percent.
- They exercise 60 to 90 minutes every day, including both scheduled exercise, such as walking or aerobics, and the normal activities of daily living, including lawn mowing and house cleaning.

“When I hear someone say, ‘I am going on a diet,’ I know they are likely to fail,” Knehans says. What he would prefer to hear people say is that they are going to change the way they live.

“It’s really hard for people to make that commitment,” he



Robert Taylor

No fan of food supplements and diet foods, Allen Knehans derides the notion that human beings should stop getting their nourishment from “real” food.

admits, “and once the commitment is made, it’s hard to stick with it. After all, we are talking about the rest of their lives, not something they can do for a couple of weeks and then get back to the same lifestyle that made them gain weight in the first place.

“There is no such thing as a successful weight-loss diet,” he states. “People regain whatever they lost when they stop dieting. Virtually everyone gains weight back when weight loss is accomplished inappropriately.”

Part of the difficulty is that most people do not realize how much they are eating and how little exercise they are getting.

“People underestimate their caloric intake by 20 to 25

percent and overestimate their physical activity by about the same amount," he says. "Obese people underestimate even more—up to 50 percent."

One reason for this is the amount of food many people consider to be a "serving."

For example, according to the food pyramid, a serving of meat is 2-to-3 ounces. The meat-beans-eggs slot on the pyramid recommends 2-to-3 servings a day. People who eat a 10-ounce steak for dinner are exceeding the recommended daily amount at just that one meal. And they may have eaten a ham sandwich for lunch and had eggs and sausage for breakfast. What they are calling four servings may in reality be eight or 10.

Most of our excess calories come from high-fat or processed food, such as steak, french fries, ice cream, chips, pastries, butter, cheese and candy bars.

"Low fat isn't necessarily the whole picture, however," Knehans says. "Variety is just as important. It's okay to have some fat in our diet, but to eat fat and sweets to the exclusion of other foods is not okay. That's another reason why I keep getting back to fruits and vegetables. So often, they provide the variety that we're missing."

"We're getting our grain, and we're getting enough dairy products and meat, but we are not getting our fruits and vegetables. If we were eating enough of them, we wouldn't be as likely to eat so much fat. Instead of eating 8 ounces of meat for dinner, try eating 4 ounces along with a serving or two of vegetables and one of fruit."

High-fat foods have little satiety value, he adds. They don't satisfy our hunger for very long. After we eat a Twinkie, we just want another one. After eating an apple or banana, we seldom feel the need to eat another.

But what about genetic tendencies? Aren't some people destined to be thin and others to be fat?

"Those who inherit a slow metabolic rate, a big appetite and little inclination toward physical exercise have an uphill battle," Knehans admits. "On the other hand, people who fidget and can't sit still are never fat."

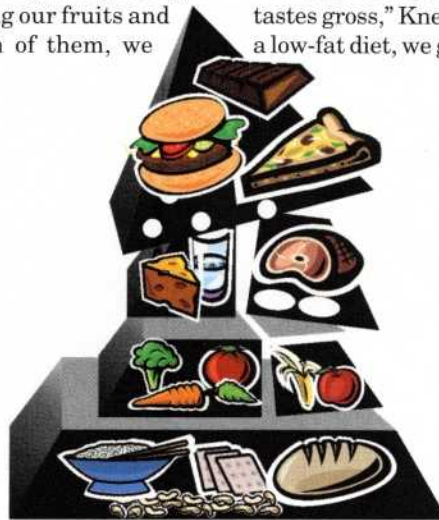
But we all have the ability to make conscious decisions about our lives, he adds.

Studies on the Pima Indians show the tremendous effect that lifestyle has on any sort of inherited predisposition to obesity. Sedentary Pima Indians who live on U.S. reservations and eat commodity food have a 50 percent or more incidence of diabetes and obesity. Genetically similar Pima Indians who live in Mexico and work as farmers have very low levels of diabetes and obesity.

Knehans reminisces about his growing-up years on a Missouri farm with few labor-saving devices, and his family



**FOOD GUIDE PYRAMID**



**ACTUAL CONSUMPTION PYRAMID**

ate what they raised. A soda pop wasn't to be found on the place.

"We were healthier for that lifestyle," he says. "But most people don't want to live like that anymore. I don't want to live like that anymore."

Health and good nutrition no longer come automatically in our day-to-day living, but somehow Americans must come to terms with the downside of modern life.

"We have to decide that we are going to eat fruits and vegetables every day, that we are going to limit our intake of sweets and fats, that we're going to find some way to become more physically active."

As for the motivation to do these things, a healthier lifestyle should always be the primary goal. Weight loss must always be secondary, he insists.

He offers some tips.

It is possible to break bad food habits by retraining our taste buds. People in the habit of eating healthful meals enjoy them every bit as much as those who sit down to a 10-ounce steak and french fries.

We like whole milk because we have grown up drinking it. But whole milk is 60 percent fat, and lots of people have gradually made the switch to skim.

"Once we become accustomed to skim milk, whole milk tastes gross," Knehans says. "Once we become accustomed to a low-fat diet, we get indigestion when we eat a high-fat meal. Our digestive enzymes can't handle it. This is a great deterrent! When fat makes us sick, we've got it made."

Read the fine print on food labels. Determining the fat content is important. It is also important to know how many calories there are in a serving. Food that touts itself as "reduced fat" or "less fat" may not be lower in calories than the alternative.

Often it takes several false starts before commitment sets in, before we find the right approach, before we accept, once and for all, that weight-loss diets do not work. Knehans equates giving up an unhealthy lifestyle to giving up smoking.

"Few people quit smoking after just one try. It often takes six or seven times to be successful."

Don't worry about the so-called yo-yo effect. "If you have lost weight and regained it, you are no more likely to have problems losing weight than the next person," he says. "Just try again."

While Knehans is not without hope for the American diet, he is realistic. "We've gotten screwed up on our intake, and with everyone hoping for a magic pill that will make the problem vanish, it's going to take at least a generation to turn things around."

For now, however, he would like to see everyone start eating their fruits and vegetables. That would be a good beginning.