

## Chapter 1

# What's Wrong with Present-day Diet and Lifestyle?

In the last fifty years diet and lifestyle have altered dramatically. The whole of society has changed, and not necessarily for the better. At one time culinary skills were passed from one generation to another, and the woman's role was very definitely the 'home-maker'. She was not expected to go out to work whilst her family were growing, and more often than not she had her mother and other female relatives living close by as back-up. The motor car was a luxury, so her daily shopping was usually done locally on foot. She would expect to purchase fresh food regularly, which would have contained far more nutrients than produce purchased from the supermarket weekly. As fast food didn't exist, part of her role would be to cook wholesome meals for the family on a daily basis.

Fifty years on the picture is quite different. We have learned the art of the short-cut, very often through necessity. We drive to the supermarket once or twice a week to purchase food. Here we are presented with fast option choices which, when short of time and adequate information, seem both convenient and appealing. Much of the food on offer has been preserved, sprayed with chemicals, injected, or indeed grown in chemically rich soil. Unless we buy organic food we have come to accept that our food will be treated with pesticides and insecticides, and that animals have been pumped full of antibiotics and growth hormones, with environmental pollution being the cherry on the top.

Human bodies were not designed to be treated in such a fashion, nor to cope with modern-day stresses, so it is no wonder that our bodies develop problems. We probably treat our domestic appliances or our motor car with more respect than we do ourselves. Few of us wouldn't dream of denying our car the appropriate fuel or oil, so how is it that we neglect our bodies so? In our experience at the WNAS it is the 'education gap' that is responsible, but when we are confronted with the real facts about diet and lifestyle, we usually take stock. Few of us, once enlightened, revert to old habits as we are so pleased with our renewed health,

and surprised at how enjoyable the new diet and lifestyle are. As an added bonus we are then able to pass our new-found knowledge on to other members of the family.

Let us examine more closely how our eating habits have changed. A century ago, meat, animal fat and sugar formed a much smaller proportion of our diets than today. The consumption of cereal fibres has also dropped considerably:

- We have increased our consumption of sugar. The UK has become one of the world's largest chocolate and sweet-eating nations. We currently spend over £4 billion per year on chocolate alone.
- The last one hundred years have seen a twenty-five-fold increase in world sugar production. In reality refined sugar is not something that we actually need, and the human race managed quite happily without it for centuries. Mother Nature, with her usual wisdom, has designed the body to convert complex carbohydrates and proteins into the sugar required. Table sugar, or sucrose, contains no vitamins, minerals, protein, fibre or starches; it may contain tiny traces of calcium and magnesium if we are really lucky, but apart from that it just provides us with 'empty calories'.
- We have to really go out of our way these days to reduce our sugar consumption as 'considerate' food manufacturers often add it to some of the most unlikely foods: *cheese, fruit yoghurt, tomato sauce, baked beans, pickled cucumbers, muesli, beefburgers, Worcestershire sauce, sausages, peas, cornflakes, and canned drinks.*
- Excessive consumption of saturated animal fats results in a gradual blocking of the arteries that supply the heart, brain and other major organs. This leads to poor circulation, and then to heart attacks and strokes. It is worth noting that smoking accelerates this process. The increased incidence of breast cancer has much to do with animal fat consumption as well.
- We eat far too much salt – ten to 20 times more than our bodies really require each day – which can contribute to high blood pressure.
- We often drink far too much coffee and tea which can impede the absorption of essential nutrients, and aggravate symptoms of nervous tension, irritability, insomnia and headaches. On average we consume four mugs of tea and two mugs of coffee each day, which deliver approximately 800 mg of caffeine into our system. That doesn't include other sources of caffeine like chocolate, cocoa, cola and other caffeinated drinks. It certainly means that there are many women walking about with symptoms of caffeine excess. Count how many cups or mugs you have had today – you may be surprised.
- We consume volumes of foods with a high level of phosphorus, which impedes the absorption of good nutrients and interferes with calcium

absorption by bone tissue. Examples of these foods are soft drinks (low or normal calorie varieties), processed foods, canned, packaged, pre-packed convenience foods and ready-made sauces.

- Alcohol consumption has almost doubled in the UK since the end of the Second World War. Alcohol also impedes the absorption of good nutrients and in excess can cause all sort of other health problems as you will see on page 8.
- Unbelievable as it may seem, we actually eat less food than we did thirty years ago and more. It seems that we expend less energy than those of a generation or two ago, and this has resulted in a 10–15 per cent reduction in food intake. This also means that intake of essential nutrients has fallen, particularly if eating refined or convenience foods.
- Many of the foods available contain chemical additives in the form of flavour enhancers, colouring and preservatives. While some of these are not harmful, some of them are, and our bodies are certainly not designed to cope with them.
- These days our meat animals are bombarded with antibiotics, to the point where they often become resistant to them. Antibiotics are used as a preventative measure and often used for growth promotion.
- Nitrate fertilisers have been used to obtain fast-growing and abundant crops. It is now recognised that nitrates are harmful and can produce cancer, at least in animals.
- Almost all our fresh fruit, cereals and vegetables are sprayed with pesticides at least once. In addition, milk and meat may retain pesticides from feed given to livestock.

All these processes in the rearing and growing of food mean a reduction in basic nutrition, and the answer must lie in eating organic foods.

Although organic food is harder to obtain (although it is becoming more widely available) and more expensive weight for weight, by consuming it you will be decreasing the number of chemicals you consume, and thus increasing your nutrient intake. According to the Soil Association, organic vegetable foods are more nutrient dense for the equivalent weight. As they have not been tampered with chemically they deliver much more of what nature promised.

The same is true for meat. Additive-free or organic meat has not been subjected to drugs, growth promoters or contaminated foods. This type of meat is now far more widely available than before (even our local high-street butcher supplies it and some local farms, and many supermarkets, keep stocks). If you find clean meat, it can be included in your diet approximately three times per week, unless of course, you are vegetarian. An alternative is to limit your intake to lean meat, eat more fish, or become a vegetarian.

There are numerous dietary guidelines for you to follow, depending on your needs, in Part Three. If you haven't already started reading labels in the supermarket have a go next time you shop there, there are a few surprises in store. Make sure you have plenty of time to spare as, sadly, many of the labels are pretty long.

## The truth about social substances

Why is it that the things we enjoy the most seem to be bad for us? When we are in good health the general rule is that 'a little of what you fancy does you good'. However, when a personal health crisis appears, it may be necessary to make some sacrifices. Often the thought of making the changes is worse than taking the plunge. Surprisingly, people find the alternatives relatively acceptable, prefer the health benefits and feel delighted to be free from the 'addiction' or dependency. These may sound strong words, but it is not uncommon to find that the withdrawal of regular, but relatively small, amounts of caffeine – one or two mugs per day, say – can result in withdrawal headaches and other symptoms for a few days. The increased sense of well-being which follows the withdrawal symptoms, is certainly worth waiting for. Let us look at these social 'poisons' and see just where they fall down.

### Caffeine

Many of us have become slowly dependent on caffeine over the years, and our children follow in our footsteps. You will find caffeine in coffee and tea, but also in chocolate, chocolate drinks, cocoa, cola-based drinks, Lucozade, Lemsip, some painkillers, and the new breed of drinks like Red Bull, Red Kick and Virgin Energy.

Caffeine is one of the group of substances known as methylxanthines, and acts as both a physical and mental stimulant. Although small amounts of caffeine can be of benefit in waking us up and stimulating our thought processes, it can have many adverse effects when used to excess. Over the years caffeine has been linked to heart disease, high blood pressure and even infertility. We know that caffeine worsens nervous tension, anxiety, insomnia and aggravates breast tenderness in women. It can also make you feel restless, nervous, with a rapid pulse and palpitations. High consumers will probably experience withdrawal symptoms when trying to kick the habit, rather like the symptoms produced by alcohol or nicotine withdrawal. If you depend on the caffeine 'buzz', then the road to good health will undoubtedly involve reducing your intake.

### Coffee

Coffee is the most widely used drug of our time. We are consuming more coffee than ever before. Since 1950 the consumption of coffee in the UK, for

instance, has increased four-fold. There are many unacknowledged 'addicts' who would find it a challenge to give up, and even foregoing that last cup can produce symptoms of restlessness, nervous tension and headaches.

Ground coffee contains approximately 150 mg of caffeine per mug, and a mug of instant coffee roughly 100 mg. When we are well, moderate doses of up to 300 mg may be acceptable, but large doses can produce symptoms that could be mistaken for anxiety neurosis, including headaches, tremors, nausea and diarrhoea.

Weaning yourself off coffee can sometimes be a traumatic experience, but sadly there is no real shortcut. Cutting down gradually over a few weeks is the best option, and even when parting with those last few cups, set aside a few days so that you can hide away if you feel really uptight or out of sorts.

#### *How to kick the habit*

- Reduce your intake gradually over the space of a week or two.
- Limit yourself to no more than two cups of decaffeinated coffee per day.
- Try some of the alternative drinks like Barleycup, dandelion coffee, or Bambu which you can obtain from health-food stores.
- If you enjoy filter coffee, you can still use your filter, but with decaffeinated versions or with roasted dandelion root instead. Simply grind it and put it through a filter, treating it just like ground coffee. It makes a coffee-like strong malted drink.

#### **Tea**

The bad news is that tea, the great British beverage, is not much better than coffee. It contains about 70 mg of caffeine per cup and approximately 100 mg per mug. However, it also contains tannin, another nasty, which inhibits the absorption of nutrients – zinc and iron in particular. Excesses of tea can produce the same withdrawal symptoms as coffee, but tea also can cause constipation.

Drinking tea with a meal will reduce the absorption of iron from vegetarian sources by one-third, whereas a glass of fresh orange juice, rich in vitamin C, would increase the iron absorption two-fold. Vegetarians and vegans need their iron, so drinking anything other than small amounts of weak tea, in between meals, may mean they risk becoming iron deficient.

#### *Acceptable alternatives*

Herbal teas are a good substitute. Unlike conventional Indian or Chinese leaf tea, most of the herbal varieties are free of caffeine and tannin, and can be both cleansing and relaxing. A good herbal tea look-alike is Rooibosch tea or Rooi as it is sometimes known, which looks just like ordinary tea when made with milk. As an added bonus it contains a muscle relaxant and has been used in trials on babies with colic. Many of

our patients prefer it to ordinary tea after a few weeks, but it does take a while to get used to. Apart from that there are many delicious varieties of herbal tea, and these days you can buy single sachets to try, which means you are not left with a box full of teabags you dislike. Our current favourites are Raspberry and Ginseng tea, Fennel, Lemon and Ginger, and Mixed Berry Cup. See also *The Caffeine-free Diet*, page 440.

### **Caffeinated fizzy drinks**

We used to have only cola-based drinks to contend with, but these days there are a new generation of caffeinated drinks such as those mentioned on page 6 to tempt us. Apart from caffeine there is also sugar, or the chemical substitutes, to consider – approximately eight teaspoons per can of cola, together with other additives. Sadly many young people get hooked on these drinks early on in life as the ‘ad men’ would have them believe the drinks are ‘cool’ and will enhance their image.

We are all much better off with the healthy varieties of fizzy drink, which thankfully are given substantial space on our supermarket shelves. Appletise, Ame and Irish Spring are all good examples. Or you can simply dilute some fruit juice with some fizzy bottled water yourself.

If you have been a large consumer of the caffeine variety of fizzy drinks, you will have to follow the weaning instructions for coffee. We have had patients who consume two or more litres of cola per day, and know that the withdrawal symptoms are likely to be quite similar.

### **Decaffeinated drinks**

Decaffeinated drinks usually contain small amounts of caffeine as well as other members of the methylxanthine family, and decaffeinated tea also contains tannin. The regulations for decaffeinated cola are no more than 125 mg per litre.

The decaffeination process uses one of two methods, either water and carbon dioxide, or the Swiss water process which uses hot water, charcoal and the use of chemical solvents. In the latter process small residues of chemicals remain, but they are minimal. So decaffeinated drinks are better but not marvellous. At the WNAS we recommend restricting decaffeinated drinks to no more than two mugs per day.

### **Alcohol**

Whilst small amounts of alcohol on a regular basis do not cause us harm, we know that alcohol knocks most nutrients sideways.

Alcohol is enjoyed by over 90 per cent of adults in the UK and most Western societies. In the last 50 years consumption has approximately doubled in the UK at a time when total calorie intake has been falling, so alcohol now represents a bigger percentage of calorie intake than it did two or more generations earlier.

This subtle rise in alcohol intake has to some degree been endorsed by the medical profession, particularly as studies demonstrate the potential protective effect of wine consumption, especially red wine, upon cardiovascular disease. However, more careful appraisal of the potential adverse effects of alcohol intake means that considerable caution needs to be exercised.

Women who are planning a pregnancy or who are already pregnant will need to take particular care about limiting intake of alcohol. Furthermore, excess alcohol consumption is associated with an increased risk of many disorders and these will be covered in the relevant chapters.

In brief, the major adverse effects of alcohol can be divided into roughly three groups.

Firstly, it has an adverse effect upon the balance of many nutrients including thiamine (vitamin B1) which is necessary for the metabolic breakdown of alcohol, and the minerals calcium, magnesium and zinc.

Secondly, alcohol in excess destroys body tissue over the years, and is associated with an increased risk of many physical illnesses. Among them:

- cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, stroke
- digestive disorders, peptic ulcer, gastritis and pancreatitis
- inflammation and ulceration of the lining of the digestive tract
- liver disease
- cancer, especially of the stomach and liver, as well as breast cancer. For example, in women consuming three glasses of wine per day – equivalent to at least four units of alcohol – the increased risk of breast cancer in these regular ‘moderate’ drinkers is 70 per cent.
- brain degeneration: brain damage and dementia
- miscarriages
- damage to unborn children
- a risk factor for osteoporosis in both men and women.

Finally there is considerable increased risk of psychologically related problems including depression, suicide in both men and women, premenstrual syndrome, loss of libido in both sexes and impotence in men. Furthermore there are substantial knock-on adverse effects for the mental health of those who live with heavy or dependent drinkers. One third of divorce petitions cite alcohol as a contributory factor. A significant number of accidents as well as road traffic deaths are associated with alcohol consumption and thus are potentially avoidable. People under stress do sometimes hit the bottle in order to escape from reality, and as most of the above conditions come on gradually, we often don't perceive the real dangers of alcohol until it is too late.

There are specific guidelines as to what the safe limits for alcohol consumption are for men and women. These vary to some degree but are usually in the region of up to 14 units per week for women and up to 21 units per week for men. A unit equals 8 gms or 10 mls of pure alcohol. A

bottle of wine will contain usually between eight to nine units of alcohol (i.e. up to 1.5 units per glass), a pint of beer is approximately 2.5 units of alcohol, as is a double measure of spirits in a pub. It is easy to underestimate alcohol consumption when trying to calculate units.

Many individuals will feel better consuming less than these amounts of alcohol. Higher intakes may be possible for those with a more robust metabolism, who are physically active and if they are known to be relative rapid metabolisers of alcohol. However, if your drinking has been escalating slowly, it is advisable to seek help. It is important to cut your consumption to the recommended limits.

### **Tobacco**

Earlier this century, cigarettes were actually recommended by doctors, but more recent research has shown that they are bad for our general health. In addition, smoking during pregnancy affects the unborn child, and women who smoke more than fifteen cigarettes per day can expect to experience menopause two years earlier than non-smokers.

Smoking also affects bone density. But it's never too late to stop. Even at the time of the menopause stopping smoking can reduce a hip fracture risk by 40 per cent.

Despite government health warnings and health-promotion campaigns, women still go on smoking. Research shows that better educated people have cut back, but younger women, who are perhaps not so well educated, are still puffing away. Being parents of teenagers we know that it is still considered 'cool' to smoke behind the bicycle sheds! To demonstrate the stronghold that smoking has over us: in 1922, women in the UK aged between 20 and 30 were smoking an average of 50 cigarettes each per year; by 1975, this had risen to an average of just over 3,000 cigarettes per woman, per year. By 1998 this had increased to an average of 93 cigarettes per woman, per week, i.e. approaching 4,840 per woman, per year.

#### *Giving up*

Giving up smoking has never been easy. The first step is to make the decision to quit, knowing that you may well experience true withdrawal symptoms, just as drug addicts and alcoholics do when they try to stop. Here is a plan to help you:

- Choose a day on which to give up, and write down the date.
- On the day before, smoke as many cigarettes as you can until you feel sick. Make sure you stub them all out in the same dirty ashtray.
- Go to the library and get a book that contains pictures of the consequences of smoking.
- On the morning of your chosen day, pour yourself a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, and sit and write down all the reasons for your decision to give up smoking.

- Pin your list of reasons up on the wall so that you can read it at weak moments.
- Put your cigarettes away in a drawer, and tell yourself you can have one whenever you want one.
- When you crave a cigarette, tell yourself you can have one but first consider the reasons why you decided to quit. Make a new decision not to light up.
- Go shopping and stock up with some of your favourite wholesome food, including some fruit and some raw vegetables and dips.
- Tell your close friends and family that you are giving up smoking.
- Take a good multi-vitamin and mineral pill each day, in addition to improving your diet.
- Try to avoid situations that are likely to make you feel like lighting up. For example, drink fruit juice instead of alcohol.
- If possible, go away for a few days to help you break your daily routine.
- Chew some sugar-free gum rather than sweets or chocolate.
- Put the handle of your toothbrush in your mouth whenever you miss your hand-to-mouth habit.
- Each time you feel you need a cigarette, stop, relax and breathe deeply, so that you get a good supply of oxygen into your lungs.
- Join a gym, and make sure you exercise regularly.
- Don't spend evenings alone, instead arrange to go to the cinema, bowling or out for a walk.
- If you feel edgy in the evenings, have a few early nights.
- Keep a progress chart, ticking each day that you have remained a non-smoker.
- Save your cigarette money in a jar, and spend it on treats for yourself.
- Practise some formal relaxation like yoga or meditation.
- If you have a partner, ask for a massage when you feel tense or a bit ratty.
- Picture your lungs recovering now that they are smoke free.

It is never too late to give up smoking. Whenever you do decide to take the plunge you will be helping yourself to better health and preserving yourself for your loved ones. If you find it difficult to quit, contact one of the organisations listed in Useful addresses on page 512 and read some of the suggested books found in Recommended reading on page 490.

### **Other drugs**

Natural remedies were passed down from one generation to the next, until the advent of the pharmaceutical industry post-Second World War. Drugs in general have revolutionised medicine and medical practice, and they have both advantages and disadvantages. Whereas in years gone by we could easily have died of pneumonia, for example, modern antibiotics make that unlikely now. On the down side however, many of us have come to rely on pills to help us cope with life, induce sleep, and indeed

counteract the side-effects of another drug. So whilst some drugs can be lifesaving, others can equally wreck the quality of our existence, and it is therefore imperative to be discerning.

### *Street drugs*

These have become increasingly popular in the last fifteen or twenty years. They are readily available and can sometimes be a tempting option for those whose lives are not going as planned. Women of child-bearing age should avoid all street drugs as they undoubtedly harm the unborn child, and in some case babies are born addicted. Drug users, even more so than smokers, tend to have a less nutritious diet than non-users, and are not so concerned about preserving their health, as they are in the process of spoiling it anyway.

Marijuana and cannabis are both widely used substances and products of the hemp plant. The pro-marijuana lobby claim that it is as safe as smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. Whilst marijuana does seem to have some medicinal uses, we are not advocating regular use, any more than we are recommending alcohol or tobacco.

### *Prescribed drugs*

Nearly one hundred years ago, Sir Robert Hucheson, President of the Royal College of Physicians, was writing books about diet and nutrition as a mode of treatment. It seems hard to believe that nutrition is no longer considered a major part of conservative medicine. One wonders how we became such a drug-oriented society. Following the post-war boom in the pharmaceutical industry, it is hardly surprising, as the industry has been allowed to assume increased power and influence over doctors' education.

In the USA in 1991 nearly £35 billion was spent on medicines by a population of 250 million, and in the UK it was £3.5 billion, or £69 per man, woman and child. Doctors issue some 15 per cent more prescriptions today than they did a decade ago. In England alone, over 425 million prescriptions were written in 1992, nearly ten million for antidepressants, at a cost of £81 million.

Even doctors themselves, worldwide, now express concern about the excessive use of benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets. The current recommendation is that these drugs, which include Valium, Mogadon and Ativan, should be used as a temporary measure for only a few weeks, rather than in the long term. Those who have been taking them for any length of time should, if at all possible, have their dosage and frequency gradually reduced under medical supervision.

When we run into health difficulties, our body depends on us to clean up our act so that the immune system can function properly and do its job. The body has exceptional natural healing powers, but you wouldn't expect a wound to heal with a nail in it, any more than you can expect to be well without treating your body with respect.