

Diet, cheat, repent, repeat. Sound familiar?

Holidays are a tough time of year to adhere to a healthy diet. Well meaning co-workers bake cookies or stock their candy dishes with bite-sized chocolates. After a while, these treats become the norm and fruits & vegetables are a thing of the past.

And while most might be concerned about holiday weight gain, other aspects of our health can be affected with these alterations in our normal eating habits. A recent study published in the journal *Nutrients*, found that heart disease risk factors also change with eating habits, even after just a month of indulgence.¹

According to Wayne Campbell, professor of nutrition science at Purdue, risk factors for developing chronic diseases fluctuate if your diet is not consistent. Your food choices, even in the short term, affect lab tests, blood tests and other biometric screenings at your doctors' visits.¹

Not fully adhering to a diet prescription is the norm rather than the exception. People often get on the cycle of "diet, cheat, repent, repeat" and may lead to frequent attempts of changing, but not maintaining, healthy eating habits.¹

To evaluate how diet fluctuations may impact risk factors for diabetes and heart disease such as blood pressure and cholesterol, Campbell and his team reviewed two previous studies (done at Purdue by Campbell). Individuals in the study either adopted a DASH-style eating pattern (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) or a Mediterranean diet.

"Our DASH-style eating pattern focused on controlling sodium intake, while our Mediterranean-style focused on increasing healthy fats," said Lauren O'Connor, the lead author of the paper. "Both eating patterns were rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains."¹

Subjects changed their eating habits for five to six weeks then had risk factors evaluated. The subjects then went back to their typical eating habits for four weeks and returned for a checkup. After going back to a healthy eating pattern again for a second five or six weeks, risk factors were evaluated one last time.

Results of the study showed the subjects' health improved after following a healthier diet even for a short time. Blood pressure and cholesterol were improved after just a few weeks of eating healthier.

"These findings should encourage people to try again if they fail at their first attempt to adopt a healthy eating pattern," Campbell said. "It seems that your body isn't going to become resistant to the health-promoting effects of this diet pattern just because you tried it and weren't successful the first time. The best option is to keep the healthy pattern going, but if you slip up, try again."¹

The results look almost exactly as you'd expect: like a cardiovascular rollercoaster. How fast the participants' health started to improve after adopting a healthier diet is impressive, though. It only takes a few weeks of healthy eating to generate lower blood pressure and cholesterol.

It is unknown what the long-term effects on cardiovascular disease are of following then not following a healthy diet. Studies on yo-yo dieting (or weight cycling) indicates that when people that are overweight lose weight, gain it back then resume dieting may ruin their long-term health versus if their weight was maintained. More studies are needed to know if long term effects of alternating between healthy and unhealthy eating habits increase risk factors for chronic disease.

Dietitians can support their clients in adopting healthier eating habits in the following ways:

1. Offer personalized **solutions** for diet and exercise changes.
2. Help make lower-calorie **switches** for favorite foods and recipes.
3. Advise clients to avoid overly restrictive, **fad diets**. When an entire food group is missing, cravings for those foods may only increase.
4. Make only one diet **change** at a time so it sticks. Trying to change everything may be too overwhelming.
5. Provide principles of the **DASH** and Mediterranean diets. Push plants!
6. Encourage **mindful** eating where clients focus on eating when hungry versus when stressed, bored, or at a social function.