



The Raw Food Diet

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Every so often a new quick-fix 'diet' plan comes along that promises to cure all your ills. There was the

cabbage soup diet, Hollywood juice diet, grapefruit, Scarsdale... we could go on for a very long time.

All promise big things, as long as you follow their directions. Rarely do these have more than a passing relevance to healthy eating.

For a while now the 'raw food diet' has been gaining adherents and getting press. While this is not necessarily the right choice to make for healthy eating, there are some benefits, as well as some cautions, to be considered.

The first caution: please do not make health choices on the basis of what a 'famous' person is recommending. Adherents to the raw food diet include actor Woody Harrelson, model Carol Ault and designer Donna Karan. All fine people no doubt, but not nutritionists.

The raw food diet may bring to mind platefuls of greens with sides of steak tartar and sushi, but that is only partly correct. Lose the beef and sushi and you are on your way. A raw food diet is based on unprocessed and uncooked plant foods like fresh fruit and vegetables, sprouts, seeds, nuts, grains, beans, nuts, dried fruit, and seaweed. A strict follower will avoid all meat, fish, fowl and dairy. The idea is to consume food that is as natural and unprocessed as possible.

The 'raw' part of the name refers to not cooking (obviously) or heating foods, usually beyond 33-48°C, depending on the form of the diet. The underlying belief is that heating food destroys enzymes in food that can assist in the digestion and absorption of food. This is partly true.

Proponents of the raw food diet suggest believe the benefits include more energy, improved skin appearance, better digestion, weight loss, reduced risk of heart disease. Since every idea has its extremists, the raw food diet is no exception. At that end of the scale, believers will themselves to believe that the diet is a solution to some very serious health problems like cancer, autism and more. Some credit it with alleviating PMS and eliminating the need for prescription drugs. That just screams out "be cautious" doesn't it?

A moderate approach to the raw food diet does have its benefits. The diet is 'nutrient dense' with high levels of minerals, vitamins and enzymes. And because it emphasizes organically grown foods it will also be relatively free of pesticides, chemicals, hormones and antibiotics that are found in meats, poultry and non-organic produce. It is also low in saturated and trans fats, sodium and high in potassium, folate and fibre.

So far so good. But raw foods dieters are probably not getting sufficient vitamin D and calcium, the latter potentially leading to osteoporosis. The raw food diet is not suitable for children, pregnant or nursing women and people with anemia.

There is no medical proof that cooked food increases the risk of disease. At the same time, it does not necessarily mean that there are no benefits to eating raw foods. Good meal planning and occasional supplements might do some good. Of course, there is much to be said for the comfort a good hot meal. Then again, something that gets people to eat more vegetables and stay away from artificial sweeteners, processed and junk foods and fried foods is probably not all bad. Just be cautious.

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