

Adelle Davis: A Matriarch of Modern Nutrition

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

November 16, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The late Adelle Davis, who passed away in 1974, is known as the most famous nutritionist in the early to mid-20th century and was my first nutrition mentor
- › Time has proven her correct about many of the foundational nutrition basics; she was far ahead of her time on many issues
- › Davis promoted a whole food diet and warned that refined and processed foods were the cause of most chronic health problems
- › Davis basically seeded the modern health food movement, the whole food movement in particular. That was her key advice. Just eat real, whole foods, nothing processed or refined
- › As food processing has become more intense and our food more artificial, chronic disease rates have skyrocketed and now even affects children

The late Adelle Davis, who passed away in 1974, was my first mentor in nutrition. She's known as the most famous – and controversial – nutritionist in the early to mid-20th century.

Her first publication was a 1932 promotional pamphlet for milk. Between 1935 and 1965, she wrote several books, four of which were written for the public: "Let's Cook It Right," "Let's Have Healthy Children," "Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit," and "Let's Get Well." Some 10 million copies of these four books were sold during her lifetime.

I purchased all of her books and read them in the '70s. As my first nutrition mentor, she was my inspiration to adopt a healthy diet. Of course, my concept evolved quite dramatically over time, from fasting and low-carb eating to my current adoption of Ray Peat's Bioenergetic principles that includes loads of ripe fruit and avoidance of all fasting.

Was she right about everything? No, but she was correct about many of the foundational nutrition basics, and was far ahead of her time on many issues. The 50-year-old Associated Press interview above gives you a taste of her down-to-earth, commonsense approach.

Davis Seeded the Whole Food Movement

Davis basically seeded the modern health food movement, the whole food movement in particular. That was her key advice. Just eat real, whole foods, nothing processed or refined. Davis grew up on a farm, studied home economics at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, and later got a degree in dietetics from the University of California at Berkeley.

After that, she moved to New York City, where she worked as a hospital dietician. She told AP she became "very disillusioned" by this work experience. She'd entered the field thinking she would "make people healthy with good nutrition," but instead, they were feeding patients "diets that were just horrible."

She understood that whole foods are the key to good health — whole grains, whole milk, eggs, meats and organ meats, fruits and vegetables. Today, however, we've come to realize that grains and certain vegetables can be highly problematic for many, even when cooked from scratch, due to their naturally-high content of **linoleic acid** (LA) and/or anti-nutrients, and the fact that undigestible fermentable carbs promote endotoxin production.

Granted, back then grains weren't as loaded with gut-destroying chemicals like **glyphosate**, and they weren't genetically modified. The first GMOs didn't emerge until the

1990s.¹ Genetically engineered glyphosate-resistant grains are loaded with glyphosate, and most processed foods are now made with GMOs.

That said, her overall message is as correct now as it was then. For good health, you need REAL food, and to keep virtually all processed foods out of your diet. The rest largely comes down to individual sensitivities and circumstances. "Just [eat] natural foods ... Nothing refined. It's that simple," she told AP.

'Appalling Amount of Sickness'

In the interview, Davis laments about the "appalling amount of sickness in America" — and that was in 1974, a time when the obesity rate was a mere 6.2%,² when only 25% were considered overweight, the diabetes rate among people under 45 was in the single digits, and 87.1% of Americans self-reported being in good to excellent health!³

Today, the obesity rate is at 41.9%⁴ and another 30.7% are overweight;⁵ 11.3% across age groups have Type 2 diabetes,⁶ and 45% of Americans have at least one chronic disease.⁷ One wonders what she'd have to say about the state of public health today!

A key part of her message was that refined foods lack essential vitamins and minerals. She was among the first to emphasize the importance of trace minerals for good health, and she warned about the destruction of soils. "If these minerals are not in the soil, they won't be in the plants grown in the soil," she said.

Davis also stressed the importance of B vitamins, which she encouraged people to get from whole foods. She was also among the first to recognize the hazards of refined sugar and hydrogenated fats (i.e., seed oils or vegetable oils).

Davis believed "a great deal" of the health problems of her day, including mental health problems, were related to refined foods — the early versions of today's processed and ultraprocessed foods — as nutrients like vitamins, minerals and healthy fats are removed during the processing, and then sugars and hydrogenated trans fats are added in.

“ If this country is to survive, the best-fed-nation myth had better be recognized for what it is: propaganda designed to produce wealth but not health. ~ Adelle Davis ”

Indeed, I've become convinced that excessive seed oil consumption is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, contributor to chronic disease in the Western world. I recently published a review paper⁸ on the hazards of LA in the high-impact nutrition journal *Nutrients*, which is available for [free download](#).

Propaganda Has Led Us Astray

Interestingly, already back then, Davis realized that a major part of the problem was the food industry's power over medical education. Then, as now, nutrition was hardly taught, and what little medical professionals did learn was far from accurate, as the curriculum was largely created by the processed food industry, which of course can never find a problem with any of its products, no matter how unnatural they are. Davis once stated:

"If this country is to survive, the best-fed-nation myth had better be recognized for what it is: propaganda designed to produce wealth but not health."

In the interview, she again referred to food advertising as false and misleading propaganda, saying:

"We've been told that certain cereals builds champions when it did not. You feed it to rats and they die."

Processed Foods Are Killing People Prematurely

Indeed, since Davis' days, eliminating traditional whole foods in favor of more processed foods has been shown to promote obesity,⁹ cardiovascular diseases, Type-2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome, depression and all-cause

mortality.^{10,11,12,13,14} Overall, processed foods may kill more people prematurely than cigarette smoking.¹⁵

Processed food is also a major contributor to cancer. A 2018 study published in BMJ,¹⁶ which included 104,980 participants followed for an average of five years, found that each 10% increase in ultraprocessed food intake raised the cancer rate by 12%.

This works out to nine additional cancer cases per 10,000 people per year. The risk of breast cancer, specifically, went up by 11% for every 10% increase in ultraprocessed food.

The World Economic Forum now wants to "improve" the food system by further increasing processed foods in the human diet and, as they put it, processing foods in "ways that are better for our health," such as "fortification (or biofortification) – where nutrients are engineered in, either in the biology or manufacture of food – and the significant reformulation of current foods for fewer calories and more nutrients."

3D-printed meat and insects are also being suggested to take the place of real meat. According to the WEF, "Ultraprocessed foods need not be unhealthy," but these claims have no foundation in reality. Ultimately, these kinds of ultraprocessed alternative protein sources will only decimate public health further.

A Nutritionist Ahead of Her Time

Davis was also ahead of her time with regards to cholesterol. For the past four decades, the U.S. government has warned that eating cholesterol-rich foods, such as eggs, would raise LDL cholesterol in your bloodstream and promote heart disease. But decades' worth of research has utterly failed to demonstrate this correlation.

The Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee finally addressed this scientific vacuum in January 2016, when it announced that "cholesterol is not considered a nutrient of concern for overconsumption."¹⁷

In the past, the guidelines suggested a limit of 300 milligrams (mg) per day; the equivalent of about two eggs. Now, the limit on dietary cholesterol has been removed entirely. This is good news, since dietary cholesterol is one of the most important molecules in your body. It's just a shame it took half a century for this change to be made.

Cholesterol plays an important role in brain health and memory formation, and is indispensable for the building of cells and the production of stress and sex hormones, as well as vitamin D. (When sunlight strikes your bare skin, the cholesterol in your skin is converted into vitamin D.)

So, what was Davis' opinion on the recommendation to avoid cholesterol-rich foods? "Cholesterol is high only when the foods are so refined we haven't the nutrients to utilize it well," she told AP, again bringing the issue back to whole foods.

Davis also advocated for the proper balance of potassium and sodium, which is necessary for healthy blood pressure, and stressed the importance of choline, an essential nutrient found in beef liver and egg yolks that most people are sorely deficient in today.

Among other things, **choline** plays a major role in energy metabolism and mitochondrial function; it aids in the synthesis of phospholipids; and it's required for making acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter involved in healthy muscle, heart and memory performance. Deficiency has been linked to the development of **nonalcoholic fatty liver disease**, which is now rampant even among children.

Modern Processed Foods Are Far Worse Than in Davis' Days

Again, Davis' primary warning was that processed foods destroy health. Unfortunately, things have only gotten worse since her time. Food processing occurs on a spectrum, with traditionally canned or fermented foods being "processed" but minimally so, whereas ultraprocessed foods have not only been cooked or altered, but also contain unnatural ingredients.

In Davis' days, the primary issue was refined food, such as refined sugar and wheat. GMOs, artificial sweeteners and synthetic food additives were not yet in use. Today, ultraprocessed foods make up 57.9% of the average American's diet,¹⁸ and what characterizes them are:

- Ingredients that are not traditionally used in cooking
- Unnaturally high amounts of processed sugar, salt and seed oils
- Artificial flavors, colors, chemical sweeteners and other additives that imitate sensorial qualities of unprocessed or minimally processed foods (examples include additives that create textures and pleasing mouth-feel)
- Preservatives and chemicals that impart an unnaturally long shelf-life
- Genetically engineered ingredients, which in addition to carrying potential health risks also tend to be heavily contaminated with toxic herbicides

That Davis was correct in her assessment that real, whole food is necessary for optimal health is evident by the fact that as food processing has become more intense and our food more artificial, chronic disease rates have skyrocketed and now even affects children.

So, regardless of which foods you eat or avoid, one foundational basic remains true across the board: If you want to be healthy, eat only real food; nothing processed. This advice alone will set you on the right path. Davis was one of the shining nutritional stars of the 20th century that understood and popularized this foundational biologic truth.

Sources and References

- ¹ [GMO Answers History of GMOs](#)
- ² [HealthDay December 8, 2021](#)
- ³ [CDC Charting the Nation's Health, Trends Since 1960](#)
- ⁴ [Trust for America's Health Obesity Stats](#)
- ⁵ [National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. September 2021](#)
- ⁶ [Harvard Incubator National Diabetes Stats 2022](#)
- ⁷ [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health March 2018; 15\(3\): 431](#)

- ⁸ [Nutrients 2023; 15\(14\): 3129](#)
- ⁹ [Cell Metabolism, 2019; doi: 10.1016/j.cmet.2019.05.008](#)
- ¹⁰ [JAMA Internal Medicine February 11, 2019;179\(4\):490-498](#)
- ¹¹ [BMJ February 14, 2018; 360](#)
- ¹² [JAMA 2017;317\(9\):912-924](#)
- ¹³ [BMJ, 2019;365:l1451](#)
- ¹⁴ [BMJ, 2019;365:l1949](#)
- ¹⁵ [American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine September-October 2018; 12\(5\): 375-381](#)
- ¹⁶ [BMJ 2018; 360:k322](#)
- ¹⁷ [Health.gov, 2015 DGAC December 15, 2014 \(PDF\)](#)
- ¹⁸ [BMJ Open 2016; 6:e009892](#)