MERCOLA
Take Control of Your Health

The Decline of Health — What Went Wrong with Modern Living?

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | July 04, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Switching from butter, lard, and tallow to seed oils (like soybean, corn, and canola) drastically increased omega-6 consumption, fueling inflammation and metabolic dysfunction
- Sugar intake in the U.S. jumped from minimal levels in the 1800s to an average of 34 teaspoons per day, with ultraprocessed items now making up 60% of daily calories
- Modern industrial life introduced 85,000-plus synthetic chemicals into our environment — pesticides, plastics, and more — that contaminate our food, water, and even human tissue
- Only about 24.2% of U.S. adults meet federal exercise guidelines, while sedentary work, screen time and convenience technology have drastically reduced daily physical movement
- Before electricity, people slept around nine hours a night. Today, artificial light, nighttime tech use and jam-packed schedules mean fewer hours of rest and disrupted circadian rhythms

Modern living has completely changed the way we eat, move, and rest — and the consequences aren't looking good. Chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, autoimmune disorders, and obesity have skyrocketed, even though medical knowledge and health information are more accessible than ever. So, what happened?

Below, we'll explore how the replacement of natural fats with vegetable oils, the surge in refined sugar and ultraprocessed foods, rampant environmental toxins, the rise of electromagnetic fields (EMFs), sedentary lifestyles and chronic sleep deprivation all came together to undermine our well-being.

Why Did Natural Fats Get Replaced by Vegetable Oils?

For thousands of years, humans cooked with stable animal fats like butter, lard, and tallow.[1] That changed dramatically in the 1900s when industrially processed vegetable oils (also called seed oils) took center stage, partly due to aggressive marketing campaigns that demonized animal fats.

- **Skyrocketing omega-6 intake —** By 2023 to 2024, global vegetable oil consumption exceeded 200 million metric tons, more than an eightfold increase since 1961.[2,3] In the U.S., soybean oil is the top choice, accounting for over 12 million metric tons of edible oil consumption annually.[4]

- **Distorted fat ratios —** Historically, humans ate roughly equal amounts of omega-6 and omega-3 fats (1:1). Modern diets shifted this ratio to 20:1, with linoleic acid (the main omega-6 in seed oils) now making up 25% of total daily calories in Western diets.[5,6]

- **Chronic inflammation and metabolic dysfunction —** Excess linoleic acid oxidizes easily, damaging cells and impairing mitochondrial function. This triggers chronic inflammation, a key driver of metabolic disorders like obesity, heart disease, and Type 2 diabetes.[7]

- **Stored in body fat —** LA's half-life in human tissue is around 600 to 680 days, meaning it can take years to lower your body's linoleic acid levels even if you cut out seed oils today.[8]

For more insights on the risks of excess linoleic acid, check out "Linoleic Acid — The Most Destructive Ingredient in Your Diet." To learn more about how agricultural shifts impact diet and health, read "What Are the Side Effects of Glyphosate?"

How Did Refined Sugars and Ultraprocessed Foods Hijack the Modern Diet?

Back in the day, sweet cravings were satisfied by whole, minimally processed foods like fruits and honey.[9] Industrialization changed that, turning sugar into an everyday staple — and ultraprocessed foods into a multibillion-dollar industry.

- **Surge in sugar consumption —** In 1822, Americans consumed in five days the same amount of sugar found in a single 12-ounce soda today. Now, the average American ingests 34 teaspoons of sugar daily (over 100 pounds per year).[10]
- **High fructose corn syrup (HFCS) domination —** HFCS replaced sucrose (table sugar) in many products and now accounts for about 8% of daily calories in the U.S. diet, despite not being available for home use.[11,12]
- **White flour vs. whole grains —** Traditional grains were minimally processed and fermented or soaked to improve nutrient availability. Modern white flour, often treated with pesticides and fortified with synthetic iron, digests quickly, causing blood sugar spikes.
- **Ultraprocessed foods and cravings —** Nearly 60% of total U.S. calories come from ultraprocessed items formulated to be "hyper-palatable," overriding natural fullness signals and promoting overconsumption.[13]

To understand why glucose is essential for your cells but can be harmful when consumed in excess, read "Glucose — The Ideal Fuel for Your Cells."

What Environmental Toxins Are We Exposed to Today?

While our ancestors had minimal exposure to toxins, modern industry has unleashed tens of thousands of synthetic chemicals. These contaminants — from pesticides and plastics to pharmaceuticals — are nearly impossible to avoid.

- **Pesticides —** Over 1 billion pounds are sprayed yearly in the U.S.,[14] a 50-fold increase since the 1950s.[15] Glyphosate, the most widely used herbicide, is detectable in 80% of human urine samples.[16]

- **Microplastics —** Found in human blood, lungs, liver, placenta, heart, brain, and even testicular tissue.[17] On average, people ingest a credit card's worth of plastic each week.[18]

- **Hormone disruptors —** Chemicals like bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates interfere with estrogen and testosterone, contributing to declining sperm counts, earlier puberty and increased risk of hormone-related cancers.[19]

- **Pharmaceuticals in water —** Medications pass through wastewater treatment and end up in drinking water supplies. In some major U.S. cities, trace levels of antibiotics, mood stabilizers, and hormones were found in tap water.[20]

For a deeper dive into toxic exposures and how to minimize them, see "**Cellular Health Revolution — Unveiling Hidden Threats and Empowering Solutions**."

Are EMFs a Hidden Threat to Our Health?

Wireless technology has brought us 5G, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth — along with exponentially higher exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs). While natural EMFs from the Earth are generally safe, artificial EMFs may pose risks.

- **How EMFs affect the body —** EMFs can activate voltage-gated calcium channels (VGCCs), leading to the formation of peroxynitrite, a reactive free radical that damages cells, mitochondria, and DNA.[21]

- **Neurological concerns —** High densities of VGCCs in the brain mean the nervous system is especially vulnerable.[22] Chronic EMF exposure may weaken the blood-brain barrier, allowing toxins to penetrate and spur neuroinflammation.[23]

- **Sleep disruption —** EMFs reduce melatonin production, leading to poor sleep quality and circadian rhythm imbalances.[24,25]

Research is still emerging, but if you're experiencing unexplained headaches, fatigue, or sleep issues, consider reducing EMF exposure by switching off Wi-Fi at night and using wired connections whenever possible.

Is Modern Living Making Us Move Less?

Physical activity used to be part of everyday life — from manual labor to walking as a primary means of transportation. Fast-forward to today's desk jobs, streaming services and food delivery apps, and you have a recipe for severe inactivity.

- **Alarming stats —** Only 24.2% of U.S. adults met both aerobic and muscle-strengthening guidelines in 2020.[26] Among high schoolers, just 23.9% reported 60 minutes of daily activity.[27]

- **Rising screen time —** Millennials often sit for over 60 hours weekly, splitting time between work, commuting, and recreational screen use.[28]

- **Cutting PE in schools —** A mere 4% of elementary schools and 2% of high schools provide daily physical education year-round, and 22% have axed PE altogether.[29]

- **Health implications —** Physical inactivity is linked to obesity, heart disease, insulin resistance, and more. An estimated 5 million deaths globally each year are attributed to insufficient physical activity.[30]

If you want a simple place to start, doing short bursts of movement (like walking, bodyweight exercises or stretching) throughout the day reduces health risks linked to sitting.

Why Are We Sleeping Less Than Ever Before?

In 1910, the average American slept about nine hours each night.[31] With the introduction of electric light, late-night TV, shift work and smartphones, many people now view sleep as optional.

- **Sleep stats —** Teens are especially affected; up to 84% of U.S. high school students fail to get eight hours of sleep, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) 2021 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey.[32]
- **Blue light exposure —** Devices like phones and tablets emit blue light that disrupts melatonin production. This affects sleep quality and overall circadian rhythm.[33,34]
- **Overwork and stress —** Cultural norms around "hustle" and productivity encourage burning the midnight oil.[35] Coffee becomes a crutch, further disrupting natural sleep cycles.[36]
- **Health consequences —** Chronic sleep deprivation is linked to increased obesity, insulin resistance, mood disorders, weaker immune function, and even shortened lifespan.[37,38,39]

For tips on healthy sleep habits and circadian alignment, check out "**Top 33 Tips to Optimize Your Sleep Routine**."

5 Ways to Reclaim the Quality of Health That Used To Be Normal

Our ancestors stayed healthy by default — unprocessed, nutrient-dense foods, consistent movement, minimal toxin exposure, and rhythms aligned with daylight and darkness. Modern conveniences have made life easier in some ways but have undermined our physiology in others.

1. **Eat like your ancestors —** Opt for whole foods, minimize seed oils and cut added sugar to restore a healthier omega-6 to omega-3 balance and stabilize blood sugar.

2. **Move more, sit less —** Incorporate short movement breaks, resistance training and outdoor activities to support cardiovascular and metabolic health.
3. **Reduce toxins —** Buy organic when possible, filter your water, avoid plastics and seek out toxin-free household products.
4. **Limit EMF exposure —** Turn off unnecessary wireless devices at night, use wired internet and keep phones away from your body.
5. **Prioritize sleep —** Stick to a regular bedtime, reduce screen time before bed and create a dark, cool sleeping environment.

The goal isn't to abandon modern life but to leverage its benefits while keeping our bodies in sync with fundamental biological needs. By making small, consistent changes, you can nurture metabolic health, cellular energy and overall vitality.

Top FAQs About Modern Living and Declining Health

Q: Why did vegetable oils replace natural fats?

A: Seed oils gained popularity in the 20th century due to industrial mass production and marketing campaigns against animal fats. As a result, they're cheaper to produce and easier to incorporate into processed foods, which led to a spike in omega-6 consumption and related health issues.

Q: How much sugar do we really eat nowadays?

A: The average American consumes about 34 teaspoons of sugar a day — over 100 pounds a year — far more than the minimal amounts typical in the 1800s. This skyrocketing intake plays a significant role in obesity, Type 2 diabetes, and metabolic syndrome.

Q: Which toxins are most concerning in modern life?

A: Key offenders include pesticides like glyphosate, plastics (e.g., BPA, phthalates) and pharmaceutical residues in water. Many have hormone-disrupting effects and contribute to chronic diseases, from cancer to infertility.

Q: What can I do about EMF exposure?

A: Limiting or reducing exposure is best. Turn off Wi-Fi at night, use wired connections, keep phones away from your body and consider shielding devices if you're especially sensitive. Research is ongoing, but many experts recommend a precautionary approach.

Q: Why is sleep so important, and how do I improve mine?

A: Sleep is essential for everything from hormone regulation to cognitive function. To improve sleep, maintain consistent bedtimes, reduce evening screen time (especially blue light) and optimize your sleep environment (cool, dark, and quiet).

Sources and References

- [1] Culinary Institute of America, Lard: A Fat History
- [2] FAO, World agriculture: Towards 2030/2050
- [3, 4] Statista, February 2024
- [5] Nutrients. 2016 Mar 2;8(3):128
- [6, 7, 8] Nutrients. 2023 Jul 13;15(14):3129
- [9] Time, October 31, 2023
- [10, 12] USDA Agricultural Research Service, The Question of Sugar
- [11] The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition Volume 86, Issue 5, November 2007, Pages 1354-1363
- [13] Johns Hopkins University, December 10, 2024
- [14] USGS, Pesticides
- [15] Journal of Agromedicine 12(1):67-75

- [16] The Guardian, July 9, 2022
- [17] J Glob Health. 2024 Aug 23;14:04179
- [18] Journal of Hazardous Materials Letters Volume 3, November 2022, 100071
- [19] Toxicology Reports Volume 13, December 2024, 101773
- [20] American Council on Science and Health, January 15, 2021
- [21] Environmental Research Volume 164, July 2018, Pages 405-416
- [22] Journal of Chemical Neuroanatomy Volume 75, Part B, September 2016, Pages 43-51
- [23] Bioimpacts. 2023 Dec 30;14(4):30064
- [24] Radiat Prot Dosimetry. 2013 May;154(4):405-16
- [25] Environmental Health volume 21, Article number: 72 (2022)
- [26] CDC, NCHS Data Brief No. 443, August 2022
- [27] CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2021
- [28] Science Daily, November 5, 2024
- [29] The Washington Post, June 5, 2022
- [30] J Environ Public Health. 2020 Apr 1;2020:4283027
- [31] Patient Safety and Quality: An Evidence-Based Handbook for Nurses
- [32] CDC, Sleep in High School Students
- [33, 36] Sleep Med Rev. 2015 Aug 28;28:69–85
- [34] J Biol Rhythms. 2021 Dec 30;37(1):3–28
- [35] Globalization, Human Rights and Populism 17 June 2023, pp 265–288
- [37] Sleep Disorders and Sleep Deprivation: An Unmet Public Health Problem. (Extent and Health Consequences of Chronic Sleep Loss and Sleep Disorders)
- [38] Biomed Rep. 2023 Sep 12;19(5):78
- [39] Communications Biology volume 4, Article number: 1304 (2021)