

# I eat too much butter

A day of bad eating becomes a wake-up call for healthier living

BY DAVID HILDEN, MD, MPH

A few days ago, I ate French toast and bacon for breakfast. Actually, I melted some butter and soaked the French toast in it, then covered it all in maple syrup. Then I drank about four cups of coffee. Later that day, I ate a handful of chocolate-covered raisins. And a bunch of tortilla chips, straight from the bag, with salsa. Fortunately, our dog, Zoe, finished the bag, thus preventing me from doing the job myself. I also snacked on crackers and cheese. For dinner, I grilled a steak and drank a 16-ounce IPA. That was followed by more chocolate-covered raisins.

That evening, it dawned on me that either I really didn't have very good standards in terms of eating (I hope not!) or I was simply not being very mindful of what was going into my mouth. I thought it was the latter. So before I went to bed, I wrote down everything I had eaten that day.

Then I got on the scale—10 pounds heavier than last year. All in my expanding belly.

The next day, in a moment of either insanity or brilliant goal-setting, I signed up for the Twin Cities Marathon.

All this got me thinking about why it's so hard to eat what we know we should. I'm not an expert on any of this, but I do get to talk to people in my practice every day about their own successes and setbacks in achieving healthy lifestyle goals. And I've learned something about how we humans think and act.

Most of us underestimate how much bad food we eat and overestimate how much healthy food we eat. I know I don't eat as much kale and quinoa as I think I do. And when we do look closely at what we're really eating, we're shocked. So I was appalled when I looked at the list I had made and realized what I had eaten. A visit to the USDA's SuperTracker website ([www.supertracker.usda.gov/default.aspx](http://www.supertracker.usda.gov/default.aspx)), which allows you to look up nutritional details about almost any food, informed me that altogether my day of bad eating added up to 2,046 calories, 2,837 mg of sodium, 105 g of fat and 88 g of protein (see chart). Good grief.

Looking at those numbers, I realized:

- **I ate too much salt.** The recommended amount of sodium for a guy my age is 2,300 mg daily. Most of us eat way too much salt, which can lead to higher blood pressure and an increased risk for stroke and heart disease. Trouble is, as much as 70 per-



The author shows everything's better with butter.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID HILDEN

cent of the salt we eat is added to food before it gets to us. The FDA recently set targets for restaurants and processed food manufacturers to reduce the amount of sodium in their foods in order to address this problem.

- **I ate way too much fat.** At least on this day, something like 40 percent or more of my calories came from fat. Worse yet, many of those calories came from saturated fat—things like butter and bacon. You should limit fats to around 25 percent of your calories, and many say they should be the unsaturated kind, which come from things like fish, nuts and vegetables (olive oil, anyone?). You can often spot a saturated fat because it is solid at room temperature, like butter. I realize that fat is a bit controversial. There are good arguments and some good scientific studies that show sugars and carbs are the problem, not fats—even the saturated ones. I think there is something to that. I know plenty of people eat a higher-fat diet and do all right. But nearly half my calories that day came from fats and processed foods—and that can't be a good thing.

- **I could have eaten more protein.** The recommendations are rather broad on how much protein to eat, with the suggestion being that between 10 percent and 35 percent of your calories come from protein. So for my roughly 2,000-calorie day, about 18 percent came from protein (almost all from the steak, which is not a usual thing for me).

It's easy to figure out how much various nutrients contribute to your caloric intake if you know these numbers:

**Proteins and carbohydrates**

1 gram = 4 calories

**Fats**

1 gram = 9 calories

I didn't calculate my carbohydrates, but I think I likely ate too many. I usually do. I like donuts and pasta and French fries and bread . . . and, did I say donuts? It's true that the carbs we eat get broken down by the body into simple sugars. The problem is that processed sugars get into the bloodstream really fast, so our blood

glucose spikes, which perhaps leads to insulin resistance, and most importantly, causes us to overeat. The science isn't conclusive on why this is the case, but too many processed sugars in the diet do lead to more insulin production, which leads to more fat cells being created. Those cells need fuel, which leads us to crave addi-

tional sugars and overeat. Thus, the cycle continues. If I had to advise people what they should most cut down on, it would be simple and processed sugars, not because carbohydrates and simple sugars are inherently evil; they just tend to lead to a high-calorie and nutritionally weak diet.

I think knowledge is the first step toward living a healthier life. For me, knowing what I really took into my body that day motivated me to do better. From my little dietary experiment, I can see how important being mindful is when it comes to eating.

Greater awareness of what we are eating is a good first step if we are to make lasting changes. Keeping a food diary can help. (The American Heart Association has a downloadable version at heart.org. There are also loads of apps for your phone that can let you record what you've eaten.)

I've found it has not really been that hard to make small changes. I still enjoy a beer here and there. But not three at a time. I just took a road trip with my favorite beverage in the car's cup holder—a classic Coke—sugar, caffeine and all. But that was the only soda I've had in well over a month. And I've learned a neat tip from my wife about those tortilla chips: Rather than digging into the bag, I remove a reasonable portion, close the bag and put it away, then eat the chips. Score one for portion control.

I'm running faithfully, although I'm not up to marathon mileage yet. But I'm feeling more energetic, I'm in better shape, and the scale tells me I've lost about five pounds in the last month. Sustainable? I hope so. I think so! **MM**

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FOOD	CALORIES	SODIUM (MG)	FAT (G)	PROTEIN (G)
 <b>Bacon</b> , 3 strips	112	404	8	8
 <b>Butter</b> , 2 tablespoons	204	183	23	0
 <b>French toast</b> , 2 slices	317	523	12	12
 <b>Maple syrup</b> , 1 tablespoon	52	2	0	0
 <b>Coffee</b> , 4 cups	9	19	0	1
 <b>Chocolate raisins</b> , 1/2 cup	136	34	14	4
 <b>Tortilla chips</b> , 3 ounces	435	299	19	6
 <b>Salsa</b> , 1/4 cup	10	266	0	0
 <b>Crackers</b> , 8	137	225	5	3
 <b>Cream cheese</b> , 3 tablespoons	149	159	15	3
 <b>Steak</b> , 6 ounces	279	703	9	49
 <b>Beer</b> , 16 ounces	206	20	0	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,046</b>	<b>2,837</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>88</b>