

the raw truth

Is a diet of raw food the path to radiant health – or is it a slap in the face to science?

At some point or another most foods have their superstar moment, only to be shamed into the back shelves of your fridge the minute the next must-eat item comes along. Right now, it's raw food that's being hailed by an increasing number of people as an answer to flagging energy levels, chronic conditions, common ailments and increasing weight. The idea is simple: eat plant-based, uncooked, 'live' foods that haven't been exposed to heat above 47 degrees and you'll be provided with more nutrients than if you ate those same foods cooked. Because, claim those living a raw lifestyle, when you heat food above this temperature, you destroy much of its nutrient value, while making it harder for your body to digest that food because the naturally occurring digestive enzymes are destroyed.

There is some debate among followers as to how strict one needs to be: some 'raw foodists' only eat raw between 75% and 85% of the time (a raw diet of at least 80% is considered optimal), while others eat a 100% raw diet. And though a few will eat meat, the vast majority follow either a vegetarian or vegan diet, sticking to plenty of fruit, veg, nuts, seeds, herbs, flowers, seaweeds, cold-pressed oils and sprouts.

So, unhealthy fats are out, along with processed foods, hormones, artificial flavourants and preservatives – all good



news, considering that the average Western diet features too many nasties and too few of the recommended five servings of fruit and veg a day. Add in plenty of alkaline-forming foods (green leaves, certain grains and non-sweet fruits such as squash, tomato and aubergine), remove highly acidic foods (meat, refined sugars, trans fats, processed soy products, coffee and fizzy drinks) and you have what seems to be the answer to all our dietary problems.

So, should we be switching off our stoves, chucking our kettles in the bin and taking a vow of raw?

YES (say the raw food experts)

'We never thought that we were not in good health before we went raw, but a few months, and now a few years, down the line we know how good radiant health really feels, and we were nowhere close to it when we were eating a standard Western diet,' say Peter and Beryn Daniel, trained raw food chefs

raw for beginners

1. Peter and Beryn suggest a 'Just add in/Just take out' principle: slowly introduce new raw foods into your existing diet, and for 30 days commit to removing foods such as wheat, dairy, trans fats and sugar from your diet.

2. Try keeping one meal a day raw – so, a salad for lunch or a raw smoothie for breakfast.

3. Add raw veggies to each meal – a side of cucumber slices, a bowl of fruit or a dip made from raw nuts blended with fresh herbs.

Before you start!

Brok cautions against a raw food diet for pregnant and breast-feeding women, infants and children, the elderly, and those at risk of osteoporosis, and Peter and Beryn suggest consulting with your doctor before making a radical lifestyle change, especially if your health is already compromised or if you're on chronic medication.

Famous followers

Demi Moore, Amanda Seyfried, Donna Karan, Susan Sarandon

80%
– the percentage of raw food in your diet that is considered optimal by raw foodists.

and founders of the raw food movement in South Africa.

The couple – who transitioned to a raw diet in 2005 after spending a year creating butter- and sugar-rich feasts for guests at a French ski resort – say it's not all celery and carrots: as long as the food is served below 47 degrees it's still considered raw, 'so in winter we make a delicious selection of soups and other warm dehydrated meals'. (A dehydrator is a necessity in a raw food kitchen.)

'Eating cooked food depletes the body's store of enzymes till you eventually can't digest food properly any more,' write the Daniels in their book *Rawlicious: Recipes for Radiant Health*. The result, they say, is a feeling of lethargy and exhaustion.

Along with physical improvements – increased strength and stamina, strong hair and nails, no colds or flu, weight loss – both Peter and Beryn say they have experienced great emotional benefits. 'Emotions become more stable, it becomes easy to smile for no apparent reason. A sense of anxiousness and uncertainty in life vanishes and is replaced by a calm, centred confidence and feeling of connectedness.'

Although there is no official tally of how many South Africans follow a raw diet, Peter and Beryn have 4000 people on their database, have trained more than 2000 people in their raw food course, and raw food restaurants have opened in Cape Town and Johannesburg. 'We meet people all the time who have found raw food on their own and are forging a new lifestyle for themselves.'

MAYBE (say the dieticians)

'Many aspects of the raw food diet are very healthy,' says Cape Town registered dietician Emily Ryan, 'including the fact

that processed, refined foods are eliminated and an emphasis is placed on whole foods and cardio-protective fats.' But, cautions Ryan, the diet can be deficient in certain nutrients if not followed very carefully. And because the diet most often contains no food of animal origin, adherents will suffer from a vitamin B12 deficiency if they don't take appropriate supplements.

'While more nutrients are usually available in foods that are not heated or highly processed, there are some nutrients that are actually better absorbed in a food that has been cooked. The antioxidant lycopene is found in tomatoes, but is only activated once the tomato is cooked, and the body's ability to absorb the beta carotene found in orange, red and yellow veggies increases when these vegetables are cooked.'

Johannesburg registered dietician Lila Bruk agrees. 'There are benefits to the diet – for example, some studies have shown an improvement in fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis in patients eating only raw food – but there is also a risk attached, including the suggestion from research studies that the diet can increase one's risk of osteoporosis, amenorrhoea (where you stop menstruating) and dental erosion.'

NO (say the scientists)

Ben Goldacre, scientist and author of *Bad Science*, wrote in a column critiquing the presenter of UK show *You Are What You Eat*, Gillian McKeith, that if it were just about telling people to eat more greens he'd be all for it. But Goldacre, and others – including John Garrow, emeritus professor of human nutrition at the University of London – have pointed out that the basis of raw foodists' arguments for this way of eating (the idea that heating food destroys its enzymes) is false, because the human body already makes the enzymes needed to digest and absorb foods.

Add to this the fact that enzymes in food are inactivated by stomach acid anyway, and it seems perhaps you should keep your stove for now, and implement only the more widely accepted principles of the raw food diet. ♣