

Dangers of excess fat

In the old days, there was a culture of giving names to cows in the village and, strangely, the animals knew their names.

An old neighbour once had a prize champion bull called Ngunü and it was really fat. On slaughtering Ngunü there was a scramble for the meat at the village's only butchery. Villagers loved fatty meat.

For most animals, the advantage of storing excess energy in the form of fat is clearly evident. For civilised people, however, there is little or no benefit in being overweight. It may even be harmful both to your physical and emotional health. Besides, it may cost you more: not just because you will wear bigger clothes that cost more detergent to wash and launder, but it may significantly inflate your health bills.

The body needs fats because they form part of hormonal structures and are part of cell membranes (phospholipids). Fats are either saturated or unsaturated and vegetable oils, except coconut oil, are mainly unsaturated, while animal fats are usually saturated.

Britain's Department of Health in 1994 recommended that the intake of saturated fatty acids in the diet should be reduced while that of polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) be increased as the ratio in the diet at the time was unhealthy. That recommendation has only remained as such and change has been slow in coming due to the role fats play in fast-food Western diet.

It was recommended that the intake of PUFA, especially fatty acids such as linoleic, be retained while that of alpha-linoleic acid and docosahexanoic acid be doubled. These recommendations were based on the relationship

GOOD LIVING

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between dietary long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids with a reduction in thrombotic (clotting) tendency of blood and lower risks of cardiac heart disease.

The contribution of beef and mutton meat to the supply of total energy and saturated fatty acids in the human diet is well recognised. Dr Ann Mumbi Wachira et al in 2000 showed that good fatty acids could be doubled in the muscle of lambs by adjusting the diet of lambs, in a report published in

the *British Medical Journal*.

Since a large body of circumstantial evidence has implicated overuse of food (over-nutrition) as a major contributor to early development of diseases such as arteriosclerotic heart disease, it is advisable to eat less saturated fats and cholesterol.

It has, for example, been shown by science that there is a substantial reduction in heart attacks during famine. Monkeys fed on American type diets high in saturated fats and cholesterol have been found to have arteriosclerotic heart diseases, thereby directly linking the disease to diet.

In a study carried out in 1990 in California, and reported in the *Lancet*,

Ornish, D.I et al showed that after a year of a healthy diet and lifestyle change there was a 10 per cent reduction in stenosis (narrowing) of the coronary arteries.

Myocardial infarction (heart attack), resulting from complete obstruction of a coronary artery or one of its branches, produces irreversible damage to the heart muscle due to the death of tissue in that area of the heart. Diet is very important since certain foods serve a clearly preventive role while others encourage it. A correct diet after a heart attack can contribute decisively to rehabilitation and the prevention of future attacks.

Meat consumption, for example, increases the risk of heart attack due to the presence of cholesterol and saturated fatty acids. A 1994 study by Ascherio Alberto et al found that people who ate beef four or more times a week are at 38 per cent risk of dying from heart attack. In another study in 1984 in California, Snowdown D.A. et al showed that there are only two essential polyunsaturated fatty acids essential for humans — linoleic and arachidonic. These polyunsaturated fatty acids tend to lower cholesterol levels in the body and arachidonic acid can be synthesized from linoleic acid.

The consumption of food items with high levels of linoleic acid need to be increased while those with saturated fatty acids reduced if we are to avert a catastrophe. And prize champion bulls like Ngunü can be spared the knife and utilised in siring village cows.

