

Native foods offer all that is needed

By Dr. Ted Mala

Today everyone talks to us about the importance of eating a well "balanced" diet. But what about the diet that has allowed Alaska Natives to survive for centuries? Wasn't that balanced enough? How about today, should one eat Native foods?

Of course there are many reasons to! No preservatives, easy to get (sometimes), and cheaper than store bought food. In fact, in those early days of Alaska Territorialhood, people from Outside had to bring their food with them and had to rely almost completely on the Lower 48 to bring them what they needed to stay alive. Slowly but surely they learned what they needed was here the whole time.

For example, seal meat is high in protein, calcium, B vitamins, thiamine, riboflavin and niacin. Seal oil which is used to dip fish and meat in is high in vitamin A. Whale meat is high in iron and all the other necessary vitamins except vitamin C. Walrus meat is nutritionally about the same as whale and seal meat and was eaten raw, boiled or rotted.

Early explorers found that lean meat usually made them weak and sick. they needed meat with lots of fat or meat that they could eip in seal oil to keep up their strength. They learned that walrus stomachs had a treat hidden in them: clams which are good for their calcium content.

Meat closest to the bone was the best to eat. Meat farthest from the bone was given

to the dogs. A special treat were the fat and muscle of the eye which has a good supply of calcium, iron and vitamin A.

Caribou meat has lots of nutrition and their stomachs contain partially digested lichens or reindeer mosses which were mixed with seal oil to make an "Arctic Salad."

The stomachs themselves were used for food storage containers. Caribou meat has one-third of the fat that beef has so their bones were broken and boiled to get all of the fat out which was later stored and used like butter and were a good source of vitamin A.

Fish is usually eaten fresh or raw-frozen. Much is air-dried and smoked or stored in seal oil. Some people cook up fish livers and mix them with barries and oil to form a creamy mixture which is also high in vitamins A and C, protein and iron. Fish eggs are high in protein and vitamin A.

Bear meat is nutritious but needs to be cooked well. Polar bear meat was not often eaten because it caused people eye problems due to its extra high content of vitamin A. All of these meats provided most of the vitamins except for vitamin C that people needed to survive.

Birds and eggs do the same. People also eat moose, Dall Sheep, beaver, mink, muskrats, rabbits and squirrels. When combined with berries, plant greens and roots, the missing vitamin C was supplied and no one Native came down with the

disease "scurby" (caused by a lack of vitamin C) which a number of Outsiders did who did not know how to live off of the land.

Christine Heller and Edward Scott did this Alaska Dietary Survey back in 1956 for the University of Alaska and found that typical Alaska Natives often

exceeded the "minimum daily requirement" at times!

Of course there were prob-

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Native foods provide all nutrition needed

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lems when food is not prepared correctly. Natives would come down with food poisoning and parasites (and still do so today!). There are cases of botulism around. Trichinosis is found in bears, dogs and some other meat eaters.

Yet all in all, things were not that bad as far as cancer goes. The medical journal "Lancet" reported this past May that Stefansson and other scientists believe that cancer did not exist in Eskimos who lived just on a traditional diet! But since 1950, there have been a number of

cancer reports coming in worldwide.

I am including a table for you to compare the food values of traditional Native foods in both calories and vitamins.

This past year a resolution was passed at the AFN convention to start doing some cancer research in Alaska. Some doctors and researchers at both the University of Alaska and Providence Hospital are starting to talk over the idea. If you would like to be involved, let me know and I'll pass your name on to them. You don't have to be a medical person to be involved, just someone who cares

Percentages of Recommended Daily Allowances
of Nutrients Contributed by
Traditional Native Alaska Foods

Food (1 pound weight)	Number of Calories	Percent Protein	Calcium	Iron	Vitamin A	Talamine	Riboflavin	Niacin	Vitamin C
Bear, Polar	592	180	8	15066	128	7	154	91	---
Beluga, raw flesh	487	170	3	678	31	21	108	155	---
muktuk	unknown	150	3	28	198	67	22	66	---
Blackfish, whole	537	104	103	111	87	3	95	42	---
Caribou, raw flesh	546	190	82	74	17	66	140	107	---
Lingonberry	136	3	12	10	8	6	22	9	160
Roots, assorted	140	41	---	---	1	30	19	28	84
Salmon, king, dried	1,010	120	13	50	59	46	22	400	---
Salmon, putrified	500,000	112	76	18	71	40	40	43	---
Seal, raw flesh	651	200	8	503	96	41	122	160	---
liver	523	126	6	348	3,345	55	81	192	---
oil	4,095	unk.	unk.	unk.	442	unk.	unk.	unk.	---
Trout, Dolly Varden	764	112	unk.	unk.	106	6	113	unk.	---
Walrus	910	135	8	239	50	42	148	159	---
Whale	500	168	8	356	30	42	148	159	---
Willow leaves	90	43	60	67	1,709	unk.	unk.	unk.	1,447

(Note: Not possible to measure Vitamin C in meats.)

Adapted by the author from Alaska Dietary Survey, 1956-1961, by Christine Heller and Edward Scott: Cooperative Extension Center University of Alaska; and Nutrition Labeling: Tools for Its Use, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.