

THE VARSITY

Are french fries healthy after all?

March 16, 2016

By Nadezhda Woinowsky-Krieger

Rejoice, U of T scientists have published a study in defense of the potato.



A recent study published in the online journal *Nutrition & Diabetes* authored by U of T's Department of Nutritional Science has found that potatoes and potato-by-products may have garnered an undeserved bad reputation among the health-conscious community.

Dr. G. Harvey Anderson, executive director of the Centre for Child Nutrition and director of the study, would like to make it very clear that his findings do not give you the scientific green light to start inhaling as many french fries as you can get your hands on.

In fact, the key to results lies precisely in the fact that eating french fries will help you moderate your carbohydrate intake more effectively than alternative sources of starch.

The Varsity: <http://thevarsity.ca/2016/03/14/are-french-fries-healthy-after-all/>

“I grew up on a farm, [so] I’m a meat and potatoes person,” Anderson explained in an interview with *The Varsity*, “and you know I’m not young anymore, and I have no health problems. So I got thinking... if we eat meals, with [some] of those carbohydrates as a side — the french fries, deep fried or mashed potatoes, or rice, or pasta — which ones would stop you eating quickest?” To answer this question, Anderson and his team brought in 20 children, between the ages of 10 and 13, for a randomized crossover study to compare the participant’s caloric intake, blood glucose level and insulin production for three potato-based and two non potato-based types of carbohydrate.

The trick however, was that all the participants had to consume 100 grams of lean meat, in the form of meatballs, before they were allowed to start stuffing their faces with french fries.

According to Anderson, the ‘satisfaction factor’ of eating until you’re full had been frequently overlooked in previous studies on calorie intake, which is why the consumption of protein prior to the consumption of starch was such a key point of the study.

“If you have protein with your meal, protein is also satisfying,” Anderson explained. “...[T]his is often the problem with Italian pasta meals and so on, is that it tends to be all carbohydrate and not much protein, and so people get fat.”

Ultimately, the human body requires carbohydrates to function. Yet not all carbs are created equal. What was most unexpected about the results, is that even french fries cooked in oil came out higher in the carbohydrate health hierarchy than pasta and rice. Mashed potatoes were the real winner, with children consuming 30-40 per cent fewer calories at meals.

The fried french fries (as opposed to baked french fries) lead to the lowest meal and post-meal glucose and insulin levels out of all the starches tested.

“The blood sugar for these kids went up quickly when they ate mashed potatoes,” said Anderson, “and [although] it went to the same level as the rice and the pasta, but because it went up quickly [for the potato starches], they stopped eating quicker. Somewhere on there there was a trigger.” Anderson also pointed out that in addition to feeling satiated faster, starches consumed from potatoes rather than grains will fill your body with far more nutrients per calorie than those consumed from grains.

“Potatoes have a better source of vitamin C than orange juice or bananas, and yet doctors recommend bananas... for potassium,” Anderson explains. “Potatoes are a very healthy vegetable — they’re a vegetable. Rice is not a vegetable, it’s a grain, and so is pasta.”

Anderson emphasizes that young people shouldn’t be afraid of carbs — especially not potatoes. As all nutrition advice goes: all meals should be balanced, and all foods should be consumed in moderation. “All I’m saying is that the advice is... don’t just eat pasta by itself or french fries by itself,” says Anderson, “ make sure you have a protein. It could be tofu, it could be a vegetarian source, or it could be fish — it doesn’t have to be meatballs.”

“Take the time to eat a meal, eat a combination, and then all your carbohydrates are healthy.”