

The American Version of Roman “Feather-Tickling”

When I attended elementary school, we were taught that wealthy ancient Romans would tickle the back of their throat with a feather to induce vomiting after dinner. Although that ritual probably put a damper on any postprandial romance (unless mouthwash was provided with the meal), it allowed them to engage in their greatest delight – eating more food. Whether or not that custom is mythical, it does bring to mind similar, modern practices of many Americans today.

I sometimes ask insulin-dependent diabetics a simple, yet revealing question. If they could give up all food except some basic green vegetables for one month, and by doing so, cure themselves of their diabetes, would they do it? Sadly, the answer is always a resounding “no.” They explained to me that they are unwilling to deny themselves any food. Rather than monitor their diet, they prefer to inject themselves with additional insulin when required.

I was with a friend once late at night, and we stopped for a bite to eat after a movie. He suffered from heartburn and acid reflux, and wondered aloud whether it was too late to take a prescription pill for his condition. He pondered his choices for a moment, and then confidently popped the pill into his mouth. He then proceeded to order cheese fries, a bacon cheeseburger, and some onion rings – despite the lateness of the hour. Surprised by his decision, I asked him why he didn’t just avoid those foods, and order something lighter and easier to digest. He gazed at me incredulously, and then explained that was the purpose of the pills. I suggested that he should forego another tub of greasy, buttered popcorn on the next movie night. It might save him a pill.

Fried foods, trans-fats, sugary desserts, and salty snacks – why avoid them when a simple pill will counter their deleterious effects? People I know would prefer to take medication for their high cholesterol, high blood pressure, or diabetes. We can actually alleviate most of these health conditions – and even physical pain, insomnia, and arthritis – by altering dietary intake. However, few people will deny themselves the foods that they enjoy.

When it comes to weight loss, nearly everyone tries over-the-counter diet pills before sacrificing that extra helping of greasy fries or a sweet, tempting dessert. When those pills fail, many turn to prescription medicine for weight loss. In addition, as I noted in my article, [“The Truth About Weight Loss,”](#) many people prefer to endure grueling exercise regimens that they dread and hate, rather than deny themselves the foods whispering their sweet names as they pass by the

refrigerator. Incidentally, my refrigerator has an alluring, female, British accent. Still haven't gotten her name though. The decision to exercise and ignore diet is usually a losing proposition, because it's difficult to lose weight on a treadmill with a milk shake in one hand, and a chicken wrap in the other.

For people who are extremely overweight, some prefer to undergo operations like gastric banding, liposuction, gastric bypass, or stomach stapling instead of altering their diet. Whatever the ailment, Americans prefer to pop pills, exercise their jiggling belly away, or undergo surgery, despite the fact that all operations pose some risk, and nearly every drug has side effects.

Centuries ago, Hippocrates said, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food." So, we have long known the association between a healthy diet and good health. But it's been either forgotten or purposefully ignored in modern society.

Historians still debate whether Roman nobility actually used feathers to induce vomiting. After all, vomiting is hardly an enjoyable experience. And, I imagine one's appetite would be a bit suppressed afterwards – especially if your seat is nearest the vomitorium.

Today, too many American's are willing to endure nearly any level of suffering to lose their excess weight – except sacrificing the foods that they love. It might not be as unsettling as tickling the back of the throat with a feather, but the result is eerily similar.

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