

## Fighting fat requires finding the right carbohydrates

by [Charlie Smith](#) on Jan 3, 2013 at 3:22 am



Ron Zalko has achieved considerable fame as Vancouver's most enduring fitness guru.

For more than a generation, lithe women and men, including famed environmentalist David Suzuki, have been making regular visits to his [Kitsilano gym](#) to stay in shape and avoid the onset of health problems.

But as passionate as Zalko is about exercise, he's equally focused on diet.

"It's amazing how people don't understand food concepts: what's good and what's bad," he tells the *Georgia Straight* over the phone. "If we start to educate them in this manner,

we'll see a better, healthier society.”

It's a view shared by several health and fitness experts contacted by the *Straight* over the holidays.

In particular, they're alarmed about the public's lack of awareness of how the wrong carbohydrates—which are converted into glucose in the bloodstream—can contribute to weight gain and undermine health.

Zalko requires his personal clients to record everything they eat in a diary over five or six days.

Sometimes, he even goes shopping with them for groceries. The client goes down the aisles first, filling up the cart. Then Zalko comes along and empties the buggy of whatever he considers to be junk.

“This is kind of fun,” he says. “Lots of people change their eating habits.”

He calls another of his weight-loss tactics an “evacuation”. This involves visiting the client's home and disposing of all unhealthy foods on the premises.

“I go to the fridge and the ice cream is gone, the cheese is gone, and the ketchup is gone,” Zalko says with a laugh. “And anything that's got sugar is gone.”

He acknowledges that cheese is a good source of calcium. However, he maintains that if a person gobbles it every day, it can affect the arteries and lead to heart disease.

Zalko also characterizes energy drinks and wheat products as “killers”.

Zalko's wife, Kathleen, who is also into fitness, isn't quite so hard-nosed about diet.

“I do indulge in chocolate every now and then,” she confesses over the phone. “He's much more strict than I am.”

Both Zalkos are fans of a best-selling book by cardiologist William Davis called *Wheat Belly: Lose the Wheat, Lose the Weight, and Find Your Path Back to Health*. It links the consumption of wheat—and particularly genetically modified grains—to numerous health conditions, including acid reflux, depression, diabetes, high blood pressure, and excess belly fat.

“What I do for carbs is eat vegetables,” Zalko says. “I'm talking about broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, and kale. All the superfoods.”

Zalko isn't the only Vancouver fitness expert with grave concerns about genetically modified food.

Fitness model and personal trainer Hanan Arabatlian tells the *Straight* over the phone that she goes out of her way to avoid genetically modified foods. Part of her motivation is protecting the health of her eight-year-old daughter.

“I've emailed companies when I'm not really sure,” she says. “If they don't reply, then you know something is going on.”

Arabatlian, 30, took first prize in the bikini competition in the 2011 International Federation of BodyBuilders provincial championship.

She attributes this success, in part, to her laserlike focus on diet. It enabled her to come out ahead of women who were almost a decade younger than her.

“Everyone in the industry will tell you the same thing,” she says. “You can train five hours a day if you want. [But] if you’re not eating the right things, you’re wasting your time.”

Arabatlian often notices that her new clients aren’t eating enough meals, which puts their body into starvation mode. She says that at these times, they’re more likely to consume junk food.

“I say, ‘Make sure you’re having three solid meals,’ ” she advises. “You want to be eating every two to three hours—small meals, clean meals, nothing processed.”

Arabatlian eats five to six meals a day, including protein shakes, which she prepares at home.

Like Zalko, she also focuses a great deal of attention on grocery shopping. When she returns home from the store, she will usually prepare at least two different protein sources in advance. She also steams her vegetables.

She prefers eating carbohydrates—in a dish of oatmeal—in the morning. That’s when she feels the body’s tolerance for glucose is highest. She also consumes carbohydrates following workouts, sometimes by adding a banana to a protein shake.

“It helps the uptake of the protein to the muscles right when your muscles are hungry for it,” she says.

Arabatlian, one of only three Canadian athletes contracted to represent [bodybuilding.com](http://www.bodybuilding.com), adds that she doesn’t impose too many changes too quickly on her clients.

One week might be devoted to food preparation, the next week to exercise. In another week, she might emphasize the importance of proper sleep.

Toronto naturopath and author [Natasha Turner](#) highlights the importance of sleep in her recent book, [\*The Carb Sensitivity Program\*](#).

“A 2004 study at the University of Chicago was the first to show sleep as a major regulator of appetite-controlling hormones and also to link the extent of hormone variations with the degree of hunger change,” she writes. “More specifically, researchers found appetite-enhancing ghrelin increased by 28 percent, while appetite-curbing leptin decreased by 18 percent, among subjects who were sleep deprived.... The desire for high-calorie, high-sugar foods also jumped with insufficient slumber.”

Reached by phone at her clinic, Turner tells the *Straight* that there’s an obesity and diabetes epidemic in North America, which is traceable to people’s inability to properly metabolize carbohydrates.

“It’s actually not a low-carb book,” she declares. “I want you to eat carbs. I just want you to eat the right ones for you.”

Her research focused heavily on insulin, a hormone released from the pancreas in proportion to the amount of glucose in the bloodstream.

In her clinic, she noticed that an imbalance of insulin was common among her patients who couldn't lose weight even on a healthy diet. At the root of the problem is insulin resistance: the pancreas keeps producing the hormone but the body is unable to make proper use of all of it.

"I realized it's linked to every single chronic disease associated with aging," Turner says. "It [insulin] destroys every tissue in your body: your bones, your muscle, your brain, your liver. It's so harmful when it's elevated, yet at the same time, if you don't have it you'll die."

Her book offers a variety of ways to address this condition, including getting proper sleep and trying various diets.

She outlines the difference between high-glycemic-index foods—such as chips, white pasta, pastries, cookies, and candies—and high-glycemic-load foods, such as carrots.

The high "GI" foods lead to a rapid influx of sugar into the bloodstream, causing a strong insulin response. The high "GL" foods might deliver more glucose over time but not nearly as quickly.

"I want people to understand that your ability to metabolize carbohydrates is as unique as food allergies," Turner states.

Dai Manuel, chief operating officer of [Fitness Town Inc.](#), is living proof that it takes time to learn about nutrition.

He admits that when he was 14, he was morbidly obese: standing 5-6 and weighing almost 200 pounds, with a 38-inch waistline.

"My parents were great role models from a professional standpoint, but when it came from a health perspective, they weren't the people that could help me," Manuel says cheerfully over the phone. "I had to seek outside sources. You know what? They did a fantastic job raising me. I love my parents."

Now that he competes as a CrossFit athlete, Manuel advises his clients to develop a "healthy relationship with food" to reach their fitness goals.

"It's understanding how the food makes you feel and makes you act," he says. "We're in front of our computers so much these days that it's easy to grab foods that are quick and accessible, fast food."

Manuel advises clients to get carbohydrates from natural food sources, such as fruits and vegetables. For a little more starch, he recommends sweet potatoes or yams in lieu of potatoes because they're higher in nutrients.

"I'm trying to avoid gluten," he comments. "I try to avoid a lot of excess sodium and a lot of preservatives that you find in certain foods. When you buy things in packages, you've just got to read the label."

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