Is a paleo diet plan healthy?

Key points

- Although the paleo diet includes fresh whole foods like meat, fruit and vegetables, it excludes important healthy food groups like dairy and grains.
- There's no evidence to support paleo as a healthy long-term eating plan.
- People who follow paleo diets long term are potentially at risk of nutrient deficiencies.
- The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend a well-balanced diet including all 5 food groups.

On this page

Details

When to see a dietitian

Top tips

Details

6 minute read

What is the paleo diet?

Paleo is also known as the Palaeolithic diet, Stone Age diet or caveman diet.

The Palaeolithic period of human history refers to a period prior to modern agriculture. The Paleo diet suggests many present-day illnesses and metabolic disorders occur because our bodies haven't adapted from Palaeolithic times to a modern diet.

The paleo diet has been heavily promoted in recent times by celebrities and health influencers. Many of these people are not qualified to make these recommendations.

What is the evidence for the paleo diet?

There is not a lot of evidence to show a paleo diet is safe, effective and manageable over the long term.

Most studies of the paleo diet include small numbers of people and only run for short periods. And study participants often drop out because it's a difficult and expensive diet to follow. This means the results of these studies are often unreliable.

Based on the evidence, we know:

- there wasn't one precise Palaeolithic diet, and it's hard to replicate an actual Palaeolithic diet today
- a balanced, healthy eating plan keeps you feeling just as full and satisfied as Paleo
- most Australians need to eat more fruit and vegetables, but they can do this without following a Paleo diet
- you can lose weight with Paleo in the short term, but we don't know enough about long-term success.

Learn what the evidence says about fad diets

What are the strengths of the paleo diet?

Many of the foods found in the modern paleo diet form part of a well-balanced diet. The modern paleo diet includes many foods, such as:

- fish
- fruit
- meat
- vegetables.

What are the weaknesses of the paleo diet?

There are numerous problems with the paleo diet. It excludes many nutritious foods, such as:

- dairy
- grains
- legumes.

There are also several other problems.

It's expensive

A significant barrier to paleo is the expense of maintaining a meat-centric diet. Research in the US shows people need to earn 9.3% more to afford paleo foods that give them the nutrients they need (excluding calcium).

It's hard to maintain

Restrictive diets like paleo are hard to stick to over time. Paleo takes away many delicious and healthy food options, making it harder to follow as a long-term eating plan. Evidence shows people often stop following the paleo diet because it's too hard to make and sustain such big changes to their diet.

It lacks nutrients

Excluding whole food groups like dairy can mean people who follow paleo won't get the nutrients their bodies need. Healthy people who follow restrictive diets can be at risk of malnutrition. They risk mineral and vitamin deficiencies. Many non-paleo foods, such as legumes, dairy and grains, give you essential nutrients that keep you healthy.

It's not environmentally sustainable

Diets high in animal-based foods, like the paleo diet, have a large environmental cost. To nourish a growing population, we must consider the impact our food choices have on our environment and its finite resources such as land and water. A diet that contains mostly plant foods is more environmentally sustainable.

Paleo and the Australian Dietary Guidelines

While there's little evidence to support paleo as a healthy way of eating, the Australian Dietary Guidelines (ADGs) use evidence from more than 55,000 studies.

The ADGs do recommend many of the same fresh and whole food choices found in paleo. But paleo puts too much focus on protein and excludes food groups essential to your health and wellbeing.

The ADGs give you up-to-date advice about the food you should eat to stay healthy and well. Find out more about the ADGs.

Fruit and vegetables

Paleo recommends you eat lots of fruits and vegetables, which are essential to give you the vitamins, minerals and fibre your body needs.

But paleo doesn't allow you to eat legumes, such as chickpeas, beans, peas and lentils. Legumes are a cheap source of protein, iron, fibre and other micronutrients, which help keep you healthy. They also help you feel full and satisfied.

> *The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend you eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, including legumes and beans, as part of your healthy diet.*

Fats

Paleo recommends you eat some good fats like avocado, nuts and extra virgin olive oil.

But paleo also recommends coconut oil and butter, which are high in saturated fats. Eating lots of saturated fats increases your risk of heart disease, which kills more Australians than any other health condition. Learn more about fats.

> *The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend you limit your intake of foods containing saturated fat. They suggest replacing high-fat foods like coconut oil with polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, such as avocado, nut butters, oils and spreads.*

Meat

Paleo includes meat, especially red meat, a rich source of protein, iron, zinc and vitamin B12. These are all essential for your health.

But eating a lot of red meat can increase your risk of cancer, especially colon cancer.

> *The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend you eat a wide variety of beans, eggs, fish, lean meats, legumes, nuts, poultry and tofu. They also recommend you limit your intake of processed meats.*

Grains and grain-based foods

Paleo excludes grain and grain-based foods from your diet. This is despite the evidence Palaeolithic people ate grains and legumes 30,000 years ago.

Grain foods give you energy for your brain and muscles, as well as essential vitamins and fibre. They can also make you feel full and help the good gut bacteria keep you healthy.

There's also strong evidence people who have a diet high in wholegrain foods have a:

- lower body mass
- lower risk of being overweight
- smaller waist circumference.

> *The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend you enjoy a wide variety of foods, including wholegrain or high cereal fibre varieties of bread, cereals, couscous, noodles, pasta, polenta and whole grains, such as barley, oats, quinoa and rice.*

Dairy foods

Paleo excludes dairy foods and dairy alternatives from your diet. This is despite the evidence that humans evolved through the Neolithic period to be able to consume dairy products.

Dairy foods give you calcium, protein, vitamin B_{12} and vitamin B_2, which are important to your health. Calcium is essential to build strong bones and teeth.

Evidence suggests eating reduced-fat dairy foods won't increase your risk of weight gain or obesity. And it can reduce your risk of heart disease, cancers and stroke.

> *The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend you enjoy reduced-fat milk, yoghurt, cheese and their alternatives. But you shouldn't give reduced-fat milks to children under the age of 2 years.*

Carbohydrates

Paleo can be too low in carbohydrates for some people, especially if you exercise or play sport. And followers of paleo often see carbohydrates as a food type to avoid.

But carbohydrates give you essential nutrients and fibre. They're fuel for the helpful bacteria (probiotics) in your gut, which can help prevent bowel disease.

There's a lot of variety in the different types of carbohydrate foods. And healthy carbohydrates can and should form part of a well-balanced diet.

> *The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend you eat a diet that suits your energy needs and meets your daily nutrient requirements. This includes suitable levels of protein, fat and carbohydrates*

Can I eat paleo if I have a chronic illness?

> While many celebrity and fitness influencers promote paleo as a way to treat or even cure illness, there's little evidence of this. And for some people, following a paleo diet could do more harm than good.

If you have diabetes, a high-protein paleo diet can be harmful to your kidneys. Restricting or eliminating some carbohydrate rich foods may cause low blood sugar, especially in people who are taking insulin.

People with chronic conditions such as cancer, heart disease, high cholesterol and diabetes should get medical advice before following a restrictive diet like paleo.

An Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) can help you manage your health condition.

Do I need to eat paleo to lose weight?

Many Australians are looking for ways to lose weight and get healthy. While paleo might offer some short-term weight loss success, its restrictive nature makes it hard to keep the weight off.

Recent studies have shown paleo leading to short-term weight loss and improvements in some health risk factors such as:

- waist circumference
- blood pressure
- cholesterol.

An APD can develop an eating plan to help you achieve and maintain a healthy weight in the long term.

When looking at how to help you lose weight, an APD will consider your:

- age, gender, lifestyle and stage of life
- current health status
- current food intake
- food budget
- food preferences.

An APD will give you evidence-based eating advice that best suits your body's energy and nutritional needs.

When to see a dietitian



We recommend seeing a dietitian if you:

- want to know if paleo is the best way of eating for you
- need nutritional advice to help manage a chronic illness or health condition
- want to know the best weight-loss approach for you
- are worried about the nutritional value of fad diets
- would like a personalised eating plan to address your needs
- want advice and support from a professional who'll help you reach your long-term health goals.

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are university-trained nutrition experts. They can help you with personalised, easy-to-follow and evidence-based advice.

APDs are Australia's most trusted dietetics professionals.

Find a dietitian

Top tips

- Eat a well-balanced diet that includes all 5 food groups.
- Follow the Australian Dietary Guidelines for advice on the food you need to stay healthy and well.
- Consider how evidence suggests paleo isn't a healthy long-term eating plan.
- See a dietitian for personalised advice on the types of foods you should include in your daily diet.
- See your doctor before starting a restrictive diet like paleo.

This health advice page was peer-reviewed by an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) in February 2022.