



Healthy food: The unexpected medicine for COVID-19 and national security

BY CASEY MEANS, MD, AND GRADY MEANS, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 04/21/20 01:00 PM EDT
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Many in Washington are shouting “follow the science.” With the novel coronavirus, while there is significant confusion over effective medical treatments to prevent or cure COVID-19, one key piece of scientific evidence is beyond dispute: Those at the highest risk of extreme illness and death have underlying conditions such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease or high blood pressure. In some studies, up to 97 percent of people dying of COVID-19 have these conditions.

So, even if you’re old, but not overweight, and do not have these conditions, your chances of survival are not bad. If you’re young, are significantly overweight, and have these conditions, your chances of survival are much worse. In New York City, obesity was, overwhelmingly, a key risk factor for COVID-19 hospitalizations.

In the future, America will face another serious pandemic. And we’ve learned from COVID-19 that waiting for medical cures or preventative medicines takes too long and follows huge losses. Further, it is clear that we can’t continue to shut down our economy and parts of our military, and overwhelm our health care system. We need a strategy.

From the perspectives of science and national security, the correct strategy is clear: All Americans need to eat healthier foods, lose weight, and get into good physical shape. All of this supports immunity. It is well

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established that obesity, diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure are largely preventable with healthy diet and lifestyle. But healthy living is very difficult for Americans facing relentless advertising for processed and unhealthy foods, addictive ([salt and sugar](#)) ultra-processed food, entrenched and culturally-reinforced taste preferences, limited access to healthy foods for many Americans, public policy that subsidizes disease-promoting foods, sedentary behavior, and a health care and medical education system that still largely emphasizes sick care over prevention.

In the face of this mess, it can seem like the simplest course is to give up and rely on insulin, statins, blood pressure medicine and other palliative care to moderately extend lives. But the message from COVID-19 is that chronic medications don't ensure resilience against pandemic viruses. Only good physical health appears to have helped. It is, without exaggeration, a Darwinian moment for America. Americans must build personal immunity defenses through radical changes in diet and exercise, or risk getting sick and dying.

This means reducing or eliminating the seven deadly sins from our diet: processed foods, excess industrially-raised meats, refined sugar, dairy, refined grains, vegetable oils and excess sodium — a revolution in personal behavior and national policy.

The "personal" changes are the most difficult. Americans are seeing that personal freedom can be [sharply restricted](#) during a national crisis. Perhaps now we can appreciate how much better it might be to have personal food choices redirected to avoid future serious illness or death.

The largely preventable chronic diseases that are [associated with COVID-19 mortality](#) not only make America extremely vulnerable to pandemics, they unnecessarily add hundreds of billions of dollars a year to our national medical costs and strain our health care resources. The question is how to change food habits without drastic restrictions on personal freedoms.

America could start by cutting the subsidies in our agricultural programs, specifically massive commodity support for dairy, sugar, wheat, corn and soybeans — much of which [is converted into livestock feed](#), refined oils, white flour and high fructose corn syrup. Americans are paying billions of dollars to subsidize the foods that open the door to diseases, paying trillions of dollars to support the chronic health care costs to cover diseases, and then losing trillions more in the economy when pandemics arrive.

COVID-19 is a wake-up call: America needs to refocus its agriculture towards producing cheaper and widely available organic fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, beans, legumes and herbs, with a massive expansion of specialty crop support, which currently represents a mere sliver of total [Farm Bill spending](#). Similarly, USDA's [unhealthy food guidance](#) for SNAP and school meals is a disaster and dooms kids to be the victims of the COVID-19's of the future.

Within medical training, there needs to be a greater focus on nutritional and lifestyle medicine that prevents and reverses chronic disease, rather than the increasingly robotic "name it, drug it and bill it" style of medicine we've been evolving toward. As COVID-19 demonstrates, we can name it, but we can't drug it, so we should try to help our bodies resist it.

The lessons for the military have been sudden and harsh. Weakened troops and a [carrier group](#) shut down by the virus. It is urgent that

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America's military leaders build the immunity levels of our troops through a radical change in diet. We're already struggling to recruit a healthy military because of the [obesity epidemic](#). Now is the time for military leadership to simply mandate reduction of disease-causing food in favor of fresh, healthy food.

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We're in a war and we're losing because we've been fighting with poor defenses. Ironically, COVID-19 provides the secret for America's farmers to turn their plowshares into swords.

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