

They were healthier than us - and even lived longer. So should we all copy the Victorian diet?

By Hazel Courteney - 26th August 2008



For most people, the Victorian era evokes Dickensian scenes of wool mills, orphanages, and workhouses full of malnourished, overworked children, and adults living short, harsh lives.

But research, published next month in the *Journal Of The Royal Society Of Medicine*, has found that not only did many of our Victorian forebears live longer than we do today - but they were also healthier and had stronger immune systems.

'When we examined the huge amount of Victorian medical records available from 1850-1900, it became evident that historical realities have been greatly distorted,' says Dr Paul Clayton, medical pharmacologist at Oxford Brookes University.

'We found that working-class Victorians ate far more than we do to sustain them through long manual working days.

'Men consumed 4,000-5,000 calories daily, women around 3,000 calories, compared with an average of around 2,200 today.

'Yet obesity was virtually unknown except in the upper-middle and wealthier classes.

'In addition, they typically ate eight to ten portions of fruit and vegetables daily, in a diet that contained far higher levels of vitamins and minerals than occur in today's nutrient-depleted, refined and processed foods.

'They also consumed less salt, sugar, alcohol and tobacco.'

Co-author Dr Judith Rowbotham, a historian specialising in the Victorian era, based at Nottingham Trent University, adds: 'Salt was used only as a flavouring, not as a preservative - preserved meats such as corned beef didn't become available until the late 1880s.'

Tobacco was chewed, used in snuff or you could roll your own, but cigarettes did not go on sale until the late 1880s and it was mainly the wealthier classes who could afford them.

And although this was also the time when duty on sugar imported from the Caribbean was relaxed and confectionery, once a luxury of the upper classes, became more widely available to the working classes, sugar was still rarely consumed.

Consequently, the working classes consumed less-damaging foods, as their diet was far higher in unrefined, fresh foods. This meant that people were healthier.



Healthy diet: Bedser Brothers Butchers shop, in High St Esher, pictured in the early 1900s

Surprisingly, figures show that in the mid-Victorian period, cancers and heart disease were under 10 per cent of the levels we are experiencing today.

'Prior to 1900, fruit and vegetables were cheap, as they were mainly grown in allotments or gardens. With the rapid growth of the rail networks, fresh produce could reach the cities quickly.

'Even in London 4lb of freshly picked cherries or a large armful of watercress was a penny,' says Rowbotham.

A poor man's breakfast would have been two chunks of stoneground bread smeared with dripping, accompanied by a large bunch of watercress - rich in vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients.

Bread was always stone-ground, and made daily with large amounts of yeast, and the beer they drank was unfiltered which also contained a lot of yeast.

And it's the yeast which was the secret to their strong immune systems.

'Victorian foods were either made or unknowingly "contaminated" with yeasts that have recently been clinically proven in both animal and human studies to boost our innate immune function,' says Dr Clayton.



Victorian foods contained yeasts which boost the immune system

'Although mould and brown spots were often visible, these yeasts contain complex compounds called 1-3, 1-6 Beta Glucans which are beneficial to health.

'And if you have a sufficient amount of them in your diet, they help the immune system fight off invasion by bacteria or viruses.'

Modern yeast-based foods such as processed mass produced breads do not contain these beta glucans; they are removed in the refining processes.

'This removal of natural yeasts from today's foods - due to our over-sanitised environment and intensive farming methods - means our ability to resist infection and disease has become compromised,' adds Dr Clayton.

Their research shows that many Victorians survived into old age despite their only real form of defence against major infectious diseases like cholera and typhoid being in their nutrient dense diet, rich in beta glucans.

From the mid-19th century, the birth rate rose and deaths fell - people started living longer because they were better nourished than previously believed.

While infectious diseases were rife, Rowbotham points out that large numbers of people survived infection.

And while infant mortality was high and many women died in childbirth, the authors found that if children survived until the age of five, they went on to live healthier lives than we do today.

'Once they survived the age of five,' says Rowbotham, 'adult life expectancy was 75 for men and 73 for women; and they generally remained in good health until their last few weeks of life.

Rowbotham and Clayton were surprised by the results and now believe that the current advice for five portions of fruit and veg a day is insufficient.

Clayton adds: 'With growing obesity and the general lack of exercise, we would never recommend eating the large amounts the Victorians did in order to get sufficient

nutrients, but the Government, as well as individuals, need to take seriously the issue of supplementation, whether it's taking pills or developing a food fortification policy.'

Of the yeast extracts, Clayton concludes: 'The 1-3, 1-6 Beta Glucans activate our natural defences and there are more than 1,000 published papers on their importance to our health; several cancer drugs are being developed which include them.'

'To improve our health we need to return to eating a Victorian-type diet, including breads made with plenty of yeast, and organically grown fruits and vegetables.'

'Alternatively, people can take purified beta glucan capsules, around 250-500mg daily, which are also safe for children.'

However, Clayton says that unless someone is eating a pound of traditional bread every day - which, with our sedentary lifestyle, isn't recommended - plus ten portions of fruit and veg with added yeast, it would be impossible to ingest the amounts of beta glucans that Victorians did.

But he cautions: 'Yeasts, including Brewers Yeast-based products and tablets, contain another compound called manno protein, which can trigger problems for anyone suffering gut conditions such as Coeliac disease.'

'In this case, purified beta glucans capsules would be better. Otherwise, Brewers Yeast products and tablets (around 4-6 daily) are an excellent source.'

'Beta glucans are a great breakthrough in improving immune function - protecting us against infection, cancer and allergies.'

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