

## Eat Right, Grow Tall

By Mike DeCinti

Across the Netherlands hotel owners are lengthening beds and raising door mantles, while ambulance drivers often have to leave the scene of an accident with their back doors open. Why? Because unlike the U.S. the heights of men and women from Europe are increasing. The average Dutchman, is now more than six feet tall - almost two inches above his American counterpart. And he's still growing.

Americans are no longer the tallest people on Earth. That honor now goes to Europeans, including the Dutch, Norwegians, Danish and Germans. Europe has overtaken the United States in the height department, a distinction the Americans had for the last 200 years.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Leiden University Medical Centre, in the Netherlands men average 6 feet tall while in the United States the current average height of an adult man is 5 feet, 9 inches. And it's worse for women. The average European woman is 5 feet, 7 inches; in the U.S. it's 5 feet, 3 inches.

Though there are believed to be many ideas for the disparity in height, one "super-sized" reason is that the shift in growth trends might have something to do with the amount of junk food Americans consume in comparison to Europeans.

While most Americans spend the majority of their "food-money" eating out, most Dutch families eat all of their meals at home [together], and they are often much healthier. Jennifer Snyder, a marketing specialist at the University Health Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, agreed that the eating habits of Americans could have some effect on growth patterns.

"Americans eat a lot more preservatives and additives than Europeans, and the food is processed differently here," Snyder said. It's this addiction to junk food at an early age that makes our children obese. Because of this, they go through puberty at a much earlier age. Which leads to a shortening of their growth spurts.

Americans need to improve their eating habits if they are to change this trend. So here are some simple tips to not only getting a healthier diet and staying thin, but also to help reverse this "shrinking" of America.

- Eat your fruits and vegetables. Eating about 14-ounces of fruit a day and veggies will drop your chances of heart disease by as much as 21%. Variety is essential. Brightly colored berries are high in polyphenols, citrus fruits are high in vitamin C, and apples contain antioxidants which protect against oxidation, which is the foundation of arterial plaque. The veggies most closely linked to heart health are rich in lycopene, such as tomatoes, leafy greens such as spinach. Vegetables contain powerful antioxidants as well as soluble and insoluble fiber.

- Have a glass of wine. Research has shown that a small amount of alcohol each day really does your heart good. Apparently, alcohol increases HDL cholesterol and reduces the risk of blood clots. Red wine also contains powerful antioxidants called resveratrol and saponins, which may provide additional cardiovascular benefits. However, consuming alcohol in moderation is the key.
- Be a little nuts. Almonds are loaded with fiber and monosaturated fat, both of which have been shown to lower cholesterol. They are also high in vitamin E, and antioxidant. Eat 2.5-ounces a day (423 calories) and your chances of heart disease will be reduced.
- Swim with the fishes. Eating 4-ounces of fish four times a week will cut your chance of heart disease by roughly 14%. Eating fish may help prevent conditions ranging from heart disease and arthritis to depression. Also, it's omega-3 fatty acids increase the production of hormone-like substances called prostaglandins, which protect against blood clots. Have at least two servings per week of cold-water fish like wild salmon, herring, or sardines, which provide the most omega-3 fatty acid. Avoid species that may contain mercury, like shark, swordfish, king mackerel, tilefish, albacore, and tuna (but go for chunk light tuna).
- And my personal favorite...dark chocolate. The flavonoids in chocolate prevent clogged arteries by raising levels of HDL cholesterol, which helps remove bad LDL cholesterol from the bloodstream. The only problem is that the prescribed 3.5-ounce daily serving provides a hefty 531 calories. Go for the chocolate with at least 60% cocoa. The darker it is, the more flavonoids it contains.

Of course eating these types of food is only part of the solution. I must also stress the importance of regular exercise. The two of those together can have a profound effect, not only on your overall health and well being, but apparently your height.