

Nutrition and physical degeneration

by Weston A. Price · Language: EN

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Overview

Nutrition and Physical Degeneration is a landmark study by dentist Weston A. Price, first published in 1939, based on his extensive field research across isolated human populations on five continents. Price, driven by a desire to understand the causes of dental decay and physical malformation he observed in modern societies, traveled to remote communities in Switzerland, the Scottish Isles, Alaska, the South Pacific, Africa, Australia, and the Americas. He documented the diets and physical health of these groups, which still lived on traditional foods, and compared them with neighboring groups that had adopted modern, processed diets. His central finding was that traditional diets, rich in fat-soluble vitamins and minerals, produced excellent dental health, broad facial structure, and robust physiques, while modern diets of refined flour, sugar, and vegetable oils led to dental decay, narrow faces, and chronic disease.

The book presents a powerful argument that nutrition is the primary determinant of physical degeneration across generations. Price meticulously photographed and measured thousands of individuals, showing that the shift from traditional to modern food was accompanied by a dramatic increase in tooth decay, crowded teeth, and other deformities. He also observed that these changes occurred within a single generation, and that the effects could be passed to offspring, suggesting a nutritional cause for what he called 'physical degeneration.' The book is a foundational text in the fields of holistic health, ancestral nutrition, and the modern 'real food' movement, and it continues to influence dietary recommendations and research on the link between diet and health.

The book matters because it provides a compelling, evidence-based case for the importance of nutrient-dense, whole foods in human development and health. It challenges the assumptions of modern nutrition that focus on calories and macronutrients, and instead emphasizes the role of trace minerals and fat-soluble vitamins like A and D. Price's work has inspired countless individuals to adopt traditional diets, and it remains a critical reference for those seeking to understand the root causes of chronic disease and the importance of preserving ancestral dietary wisdom.

Key Takeaways

- Traditional diets, rich in fat-soluble vitamins and minerals, are essential for optimal dental and physical development.

- Modern processed foods, especially refined flour, sugar, and vegetable oils, are associated with dental decay and physical degeneration.
- The effects of poor nutrition can appear within a single generation, affecting the health of offspring.
- Price identified 'activators' such as vitamin A and D, found in animal fats, as key nutrients for proper growth.
- Isolated populations eating native diets had nearly perfect dental arches and immunity to tooth decay.
- When these populations adopted modern diets, their health declined dramatically, including increased rates of tuberculosis and other diseases.
- Price recommended consuming nutrient-dense foods like organ meats, fish eggs, and dairy from grass-fed animals.
- The book advocates for returning to traditional food preparation methods, such as soaking and fermenting grains, to enhance nutrient availability.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Why Seek the Wisdom of the Ancients?

Price introduces his motivation: the alarming prevalence of dental decay and physical deformities in modern civilization. He sets out to find isolated groups still living on native diets to see if they had better health. He explains his method of studying these groups and comparing them with those who had adopted modern foods.

Chapter 2: The Isolated Swiss

Price describes the inhabitants of the Loetschental Valley in Switzerland, who lived on a diet of rye bread, cheese, and milk from cows grazing on alpine pastures. He found excellent dental health and well-formed faces. He contrasts this with neighboring groups who had adopted white flour and sugar, showing high rates of decay.

Chapter 3: The Gaelics of the Outer Hebrides

Price studies the fishing and crofting communities of the Outer Hebrides, whose diet included fish, shellfish, and oats. He notes their robust health and good teeth, but also observes that the younger generation, who had adopted modern foods, showed increasing dental problems.

Chapter 4: The Eskimos of Alaska

Price examines the traditional Eskimo diet, which consisted largely of fish, seal, and whale blubber, rich in fat-soluble vitamins. He found excellent dental health and physical development. He also notes that Eskimos who had adopted white flour and sugar suffered from tooth decay and other diseases.

Chapter 5: The Indians of the Far North

Price investigates the Indian tribes of northern Canada, who relied on caribou, moose, and fish. He found that those following traditional diets had good teeth and robust health, while those trading for modern foods experienced rapid physical degeneration.

Chapter 6: The Melanesians of the South Pacific

Price studies the Melanesians of the Solomon Islands and other Pacific islands, who ate a variety of seafood, root vegetables, and fruits. He found excellent dental health and well-formed faces. He contrasts this with the poor health of those who had adopted imported foods like sugar and white rice.

Chapter 7: The Polynesians of the South Pacific

Price examines the Polynesians of New Zealand and other islands, who traditionally ate fish, taro, and other native plants. He found that those on native diets had good teeth and health, but those who had adopted European foods suffered from dental decay and other ailments.

Chapter 8: The African Tribes

Price studies various African tribes, including the Masai and the Kikuyu, who had distinct traditional diets. The Masai consumed milk, blood, and meat, while the Kikuyu ate a plant-based diet. Both groups showed excellent dental health on their native diets, but degenerated when they adopted modern foods.

Chapter 9: The Aborigines of Australia

Price investigates the Australian Aborigines, who lived as hunter-gatherers on a varied diet of native animals and plants. He found excellent dental health and physical development. He also notes the rapid decline in health when they were moved to missions and given modern foods.

Chapter 10: The Indians of the Amazon

Price studies the indigenous peoples of the Amazon rainforest, who ate a diet of fish, game, and native fruits and vegetables. He found good dental health and robust physiques. He contrasts this with the poor health of those who had adopted modern foods from traders.

Chapter 11: The Indians of the Andes

Price examines the highland Indians of Peru and Bolivia, who lived on potatoes, quinoa, and other native crops, along with llama meat. He found excellent dental health and physical development. He notes that those who had moved to lowland areas and adopted modern diets suffered from degeneration.

Chapter 12: The Future of Civilization

Price synthesizes his findings, concluding that modern processed foods are the primary cause of physical degeneration. He calls for a return to nutrient-dense, traditional diets and emphasizes the importance of fat-soluble vitamins and minerals for future generations.

Themes

- Traditional diets
- Dental health
- Physical degeneration
- Nutrient density
- Modern processed foods
- Fat-soluble vitamins

Notable Quotes

- "Life in all its fullness is the expression of nutrition." — Price's opening statement in the book, setting the theme that nutrition is the foundation of health.
- "The physical degeneration of the modernized groups was in direct proportion to the degree of deviation from the primitive dietary pattern." — Price's summary of his comparative studies, showing that the more a group adopted modern foods, the worse their health.
- "No one can be healthy who does not have the proper nutrition." — A general principle Price states in his discussions of the causes of degeneration.
- "The evidence indicates that the physical degeneration of the modernized groups is due to the lack of certain food factors, particularly the fat-soluble vitamins and minerals." — Price's conclusion from his research, identifying the specific nutritional deficiencies responsible for the decline.
- "The primitive races have been able to maintain a high degree of physical perfection because they have lived in harmony with nature's laws." — Price's observation that traditional peoples followed natural dietary patterns that supported health.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Nutrition and physical degeneration about?

It's a 1939 book by dentist Weston A. Price, documenting his global research on isolated populations eating traditional diets. He found that these groups had excellent dental health and physical development, while those adopting modern processed foods suffered from tooth decay, malformed faces, and chronic disease. The book argues that nutrition is the key to physical health.

Is Nutrition and physical degeneration worth reading?

Yes, for anyone interested in nutrition, health, or anthropology. It's a foundational text for the ancestral health movement, offering a unique blend of field research and dental observation. Even though it's old, its insights about the dangers of processed foods and the importance of nutrient-dense diets remain relevant. Some scientific details are dated, but the core message is powerful.

How does Nutrition and physical degeneration end?

Spoiler: The book concludes with a call to action, urging modern societies to return to traditional, nutrient-dense diets to prevent physical degeneration. Price summarizes his findings across all studied populations, emphasizing the importance of fat-soluble vitamins and minerals. He argues that the future of civilization depends on improving nutrition, especially for mothers and children.

Who should read Nutrition and physical degeneration?

This book is ideal for health enthusiasts, nutritionists, dentists, anthropologists, and anyone curious about the link between diet and physical health. It's also valuable for parents concerned about their children's development. Readers open to early 20th-century scientific perspectives and detailed field observations will find it most engaging.

How long does it take to read Nutrition and physical degeneration?

The book has about 500 pages, including many photographs and charts. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take roughly 8-10 hours. However, the detailed photographs and case studies may slow you down, so plan for a few days of reading.