

# THE PLANT PARADOX



THE HIDDEN DANGERS IN “HEALTHY”  
FOODS THAT CAUSE DISEASE  
AND WEIGHT GAIN

STEVEN R. GUNDRY, MD

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with Olivia Bell Buehl



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# Introduction

## It's Not Your Fault

Suppose that in the next few pages I told you that everything you thought you knew about your diet, your health, and your weight is wrong. For decades, I believed those lies as well. I was eating a “healthy” diet (after all, I’m a heart surgeon). I rarely ate fast food; I consumed low-fat dairy and whole grains. (Okay, I will admit to having a penchant for Diet Coke, but that was better than drinking the original sugar-filled brew, right?) Nor was I a slouch in the fitness department. I ran thirty miles a week and worked out at the gym daily. Despite the fact that I was hauling around excess weight, had high blood pressure, migraine headaches, arthritis, high cholesterol, and insulin resistance, I continued to believe that I was doing everything right. (Spoiler: I’m now seventy pounds lighter and no longer have any of these health issues.) But a nagging voice inside my head kept asking the same question: “If I’m doing everything right, why is this happening to me?”

Does this sound eerily familiar?

If you’re reading this book, you, too, probably know that something isn’t right, but you don’t know what. Maybe you simply can’t take control of your raging appetite or cravings for certain foods. Low-carb, low-fat, Paleo, low-glycemic, and other diets haven’t helped and were unsustainable—or after initial success, the lost weight quickly crept back. Nor has running, speed walking, weight training, aerobics, CrossFit, yoga, core training, spinning, high-intensity interval

training, or whichever exercise program(s) you've embarked upon banished those stubborn extra pounds.

Excess weight (or being significantly underweight) is a serious problem, but perhaps your primary concern is food intolerances and cravings, digestive issues, headaches, brain fog, lack of energy, aching joints, morning stiffness, adult acne, or a host of other conditions you just can't shake. Possibly, you suffer from one or more autoimmune diseases or a disorder such as type 1 or type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, or a thyroid or other hormonal condition. Perhaps you have asthma or allergies. You may feel that somehow you're at fault for your poor health or your excess pounds, adding guilt to your heavy load. If it is any comfort, you are not alone.

All that is about to change for you. Welcome to *The Plant Paradox*.

First, repeat after me: "I am not to blame." That's right: your health problems are not your fault.

I have the solution to what ails you, but please prepare to have all your assumptions about what you thought you knew about living a healthy life challenged. This information will dispel myths that are embedded in our culture, and introduce concepts that may initially blow your mind. But here's the really good news. The secrets I'll share with you will reveal what is keeping you sick, tired, depleted of energy, overweight (or underweight), fuzzy headed, or in pain. And once you discover and remove the roadblocks standing in the way of vibrant health and a slim body, your life will change.

You see, with all modesty, I've found there is a common cause for most health problems. It is based on ample research, including my own papers, published in peer-reviewed medical journals, but no one has put it all together before. While health "experts" have pointed to our laziness, our addiction to fast food, our consumption of beverages full of high-fructose corn syrup, and the host

of toxins in the environment as causes for our current ailments (among many others), sadly, they are wrong. (Not that these things don't *contribute* to poor health!) The real cause is so well hidden that you would never have noticed it. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Starting in the mid-1960s, we have seen a rampant rise in obesity, type 1 and type 2 diabetes, autoimmune diseases, asthma, allergies and sinus conditions, arthritis, cancer, heart disease, osteoporosis, Parkinson's disease, and dementia. Not coincidentally, in the same period, there have been many seemingly imperceptible changes in our diet and in the personal care products we use. I've discovered a significant part of the answer to the mystery of why our collective health has declined and our collective weight has risen so drastically in just a few decades—and it starts with plant proteins called lectins.

You've probably never heard of lectins, but you are definitely familiar with gluten, which is just one lectin among thousands. Lectins are found in almost all plants, as well as some other foods. In fact, lectins are present in the vast majority of foods in the current American diet, including meat, poultry, and fish. Among their other functions, lectins level the playing field in the war between plants and animals. How so? Long before humans walked the earth, plants protected themselves and their offspring from hungry insects by producing toxins, including lectins, in the plants' seeds and other parts.

It turns out the same plant toxins that can kill or immobilize an insect can also silently destroy your health and insidiously impact your weight. I titled this book *The Plant Paradox* because while many plant foods are good for you—and form the bedrock of my eating plan—others that have been regarded as “health foods” are actually to blame for making you sick and overweight. That's right, most plants actually want to make you ill. Another paradox: small

portions of some plants are good for you but large amounts are bad for you.

We'll delve into more detail on all of this shortly.

Have you ever been told, "You're just not yourself today"? As you'll learn, thanks to subtle changes in the foods we eat most often, the way food is prepared, the use of certain personal care products, and the drugs that you assume will improve your health, you really aren't "yourself" anymore. To borrow a term from the computer world, you've been hacked. The entire collection of cells, the inputs and outputs within you, and the way your cells communicate with one another have been altered.

Not to worry. This alteration can be reversed, allowing your body to heal and achieve a healthy weight. To begin the restoration of our collective health, we need to take a step back—actually several steps—in order to move forward. We chose the first wrong fork in the road thousands of years ago and have continued to take additional wrong paths at almost every opportunity. (Just to be clear, the so-called Paleo diet is the furthest thing from what I am talking about.) This book will provide the road map to get back on track, starting with eliminating our overreliance on certain foods as our primary form of sustenance.

What you have just read might seem so unbelievable that you may be wondering about the experience I've had that could have led to such claims, or if I'm even really a doctor. I assure you I am. As a bit of background, after graduating from Yale University with honors, I got my MD from the Medical College of Georgia and then entered the cardiothoracic surgery program at the University of Michigan. I later won a prestigious fellowship in research at the National Institutes of Health. I spent sixteen years as a professor of surgery and pediatrics in cardiothoracic surgery and head of cardiothoracic surgery at Loma Linda University School of Medicine,

where I saw tens of thousands of patients with a spectrum of health issues, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, autoimmune conditions, diabetes, and obesity. Then, in a move that stunned my colleagues, I left Loma Linda.

Why would a successful practitioner of conventional medicine leave such an important position at a prestigious medical center? When I turned my own health around and went from obese to slim, something in me had shifted: I realized that I could reverse heart disease with diet instead of surgery. To this end, I established the International Heart and Lung Institute—and within it the Center for Restorative Medicine—in Palm Springs and Santa Barbara, California. I published my first book, *Dr. Gundry's Diet Evolution: Turn Off the Genes That Are Killing You and Your Waistline*, which described the changes my heart, diabetic, obese, and other patients experienced on my diet plan—and which revolutionized my medical practice and changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of readers. It also helped propel me on the path that ultimately led to *this* book.

In addition to being a physician, I'm a medical researcher and inventor of many of the devices used to protect the heart during heart surgery. With my former partner, Leonard Bailey, I performed more infant and pediatric heart transplants than anyone in the world. I hold multiple patents on medical devices and have written extensively on transplant immunology and xenotransplantation. That mouthful of a word refers to fooling the immune system of one species to accept the organ of another species. Thanks to my work with xenotransplantation, I happen to hold the record for the longest-surviving pig-to-baboon heart transplant. So, yes, I know how to fool the immune system—and I know when the immune system is being fooled. I also know how to fix it.

Unlike so many authors and so-called health experts, this isn't

my first rodeo. I wrote my senior thesis at Yale University about how food availability at different times of year prompted the evolution of great apes into modern humans. As a heart surgeon, cardiologist, and immunologist, my entire career has been about how the immune system makes decisions about what is its friend and what is its foe. The wealth of these experiences made me uniquely qualified to discover the solution to your health and weight problems introduced in this book.

In my evolving role as a health sleuth, I came to find that many patients who had used my diet to reverse coronary artery disease, hypertension, or diabetes (or a combination of two or three) related that their arthritis also quickly began to subside and their heartburn disappeared. My patients also noted improved mood and resolution of fairly chronic bowel issues. Excess pounds disappeared effortlessly, along with food cravings. As I studied the results of the elaborate lab tests I devised for each patient and experimented with the allowed foods, certain striking patterns emerged, which made me start tinkering with the original dietary program.

Rewarding as these results were, it wasn't enough for me just to see these dramatic improvements in my patients. I needed to know the whats and whys. (Remember, I'm a researcher as well as a physician.) What altered that had made them ill and overweight? Which items on the lists of "good" and "bad" foods that I gave all my patients restored their health? Or, more important, which eliminated foods had been part of the problem? And were factors other than dietary changes also playing a role?

A meticulous review of my patients' histories, physical conditions, specialized lab tests, and tests on the flexibility of blood vessels convinced me that most of them (and most likely you, as well) are literally at war with themselves, thanks to common "disruptors" that interfere with the body's natural ability to heal itself. These

disruptors encompass changes in how food animals are themselves fed, as well as in some foods that are regarded as healthful—whole grains, lentils, and other beans, for example—plus a host of chemicals, including herbicides like Roundup, and the use of broad-spectrum antibiotics. On top of that, I’ve found that antacids, aspirin, and other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) have drastically changed the environment in your gut.

Over the past fifteen years, I have presented my findings at prestigious academic medical conferences such as the American Heart Association and published them in peer-reviewed medical journals, all the while refining my program.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this work, I have become an acknowledged expert on the human microbiome, the bacterial and other organisms that live in you and on you.

As it stands, the Plant Paradox Program consists of a cornucopia of vegetables, limited amounts of high-quality protein sources, as well as certain fruits (but only in season), tree nuts, and certain dairy products and oils. Equally important are the foods I omit, at least initially—namely, grains and the flours made from them, pseudo-grains, lentils and other legumes (including all soy products), fruits that we call vegetables (tomatoes, peppers, and their kin), and refined oils.

You may be in a rush to get started on the Plant Paradox Program ASAP, but I’ve found that my patients are far more likely to succeed in healing themselves when they understand the root causes behind their poor health. So, before we get to the “solution,” I’ll spend Part I explaining the often shocking and frequently amazing story of those root causes and how they have affected most of us over the last several decades. When you get to Part II, you’ll learn how to start the program with a three-day cleanse. Then you’ll find out how to repair your damaged gut and feed your gut microbes the food they need to thrive, including a group of foods called resistant

starches, which conveniently also help you feel satiated and shed unwanted pounds and inches. Once you've stabilized your health, you'll move on to Phase 3 of the Plant Paradox Program, which becomes your blueprint for longevity. The program includes regular modified fasts to give your gut a mini-vacation from the hard work of digestion. At the same time, it allows the energy-producing mitochondria in your brain and cells a chance to enjoy a well-deserved rest. For those of you with acute health needs, I've provided a chapter on the Plant Paradox Intensive Care Program. In Part III, I'll provide meal plans and simple but delectable recipes for all three phases of the Plant Paradox Program. They'll make you forget those problematic foods that once kept you plump, sick, and in pain.

While modifying your eating habits is a significant component of the program, I'll also recommend other changes, such as eliminating certain over-the-counter drugs and personal care products. Follow the complete program and I promise you will banish most, if not all, of your health problems, achieve a healthy weight, reboot your energy level, and elevate your mood. Once you start experiencing the effects of this new approach to eating and living—my patients start to feel better and lose weight within days—you'll understand the remarkable changes that occur when you feed your body (and your microbiome) foods on which it thrives. As an added reward, you will simultaneously eliminate the disruptive ingredients and other agents that stand in the way of enjoying a long, healthy life.

Turn the page so I can begin to share this life-changing experience with you.

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*The Plant Paradox*

## About the Author

**Steven R. Gundry, MD**, is a cum laude graduate of Yale University, with special honors in human biological and social evolution. After graduating Alpha Omega Alpha from the Medical College of Georgia, Dr. Gundry completed residencies in general surgery and cardiothoracic surgery at the University of Michigan and served as a clinical associate at the National Institutes of Health. He invented devices that reverse the cell death seen in heart attacks; variations of these devices became the Medtronic Gundry Retrograde Cardioplegia Cannula, the most widely used device of its kind worldwide to protect the heart during open-heart surgery. After completing a fellowship in congenital heart surgery at the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, in London, and two years as a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Dr. Gundry was recruited as professor and chairman of cardiothoracic surgery at Loma Linda University School of Medicine.

During his tenure at Loma Linda, Dr. Gundry pioneered the field of xenotransplantation, the study of how the immune system and blood vessel proteins of one species react to the transplanted heart of a foreign species. He was one of the original twenty investigators of the first FDA-approved implantable left ventricular assist device. Dr. Gundry is the inventor of the Gundry Ministernotomy, the most widely used minimally invasive surgical technique to operate on the aortic valve; the Gundry Lateral Tunnel, a living tissue that can rebuild parts of the heart in children with severe congenital heart malformations; and the Skoosh

Venous Cannula, the most widely used cannula in minimally invasive heart operations.

As a consultant to Computer Motion (now Intuitive Surgical), Dr. Gundry was one of the fathers of robotic heart surgery. He received early FDA approval for robotic-assisted minimally invasive surgery for coronary artery bypass and mitral valve operations. He holds patents on connecting blood vessels and coronary artery bypasses without the need for sutures, as well as on repairing the mitral valve without the need for sutures and the heart-lung machine.

Dr. Gundry has served on the Board of Directors of the American Society of Artificial Internal Organs and was a founding board member and treasurer of the International Society of Minimally Invasive Cardiothoracic Surgery. He also served two successive terms as president of the Board of Directors of the American Heart Association, Desert Division. Dr. Gundry has been elected a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, the American College of Cardiology, the American Surgical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the College of Chest Physicians. He has served numerous times as an abstract reviewer for the American Heart Association annual meetings. The author of more than three hundred articles, chapters, and abstracts in peer-reviewed journals on surgical, immunologic, genetic, nutritional, and lipid investigations, he has also operated in more than thirty countries, including on multiple charitable missions.

In 2000, inspired by the stunning reversal of coronary artery disease in an “inoperable” patient by using a combination of dietary changes and nutraceutical supplements, Dr. Gundry changed the arc of his career. An obese chronic diet failure himself, he adapted his Yale University thesis to design a diet based on evolutionary coding and the interaction of our ancestral microbiome, genes, and environment. Following this program enabled him to reverse his own numerous medical problems. In the process, he effortlessly lost seventy pounds and has kept them off for seventeen years. These discoveries led him to establish the International Heart and Lung Institute—and, as part of it, the Center for Restorative Medicine—in Palm Springs and Santa Barbara,

California. There he has devoted his research and clinical practice to the dietary and nutraceutical reversal of most diseases, including heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune disease, cancer, arthritis, kidney failure, and neurological conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer's disease, using sophisticated blood tests and blood flow measurements to maximize his patients' health span and longevity.

This research resulted in the publication of his bestselling first book, *Dr. Gundry's Diet Evolution: Turn Off the Genes That Are Killing You and Your Waistline*, in 2008. Following up on the success of that book, he has become one of the world's authorities on the human microbiome and the interaction between the gut, the foods we ingest, the products we use, and our physical and mental health and well-being. In recent years, more than 50 percent of his practice has been devoted to the reversal of challenging autoimmune conditions in patients referred to him by health professionals around the world.

Dr. Gundry has been named one of America's Top Doctors for twenty-one years in a row by Castle Connolly, the independent physician rating company; to *Palm Springs Life* Top Doctors for fifteen years in a row; and to *Los Angeles Magazine's* Top Doctors for the last six years.

Dr. Gundry is the creator of the nutritional guidelines for the Six Senses Resorts and Spas worldwide and a senior scientific advisor to Pegasus Capital Advisors. He has been invited to lecture at both the Stanford and MIT Brain Summit meetings on the impact of the gut on brain health and its deterioration. In 2016, he founded GundryMD, his own line of nutraceutical and skin-care supplements.

Dr. Gundry's wife, Penny, and their dogs, Pearl, Minnie, and Sadie, live in Palm Springs and Montecito, California. His grown daughters, Elizabeth and Melissa, their husbands, Tim and Ray, and his grandchildren, Sophie and Oliver, live nearby.

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