Proteinaholic
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HOW OUR OBSESSION WITH MEAT IS KILLING US AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

Garth Davis, M.D.
with Howard Jacobson, Ph.D.

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PART ONE

Garth Davis,
Proteinaholic

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My name is Garth Davis, and I was a proteinaholic.
For many years, I obeyed what I’d been taught by the medical establishment, by my colleagues, and by the media: that each and every meal and snack had to contain a huge serving of my beloved protein. I would gulp down protein drinks whenever possible, and dive into big, thick steaks practically daily. Protein was my drug and, worse yet, it was my prescription. I actually pushed protein on my patients, encouraging them to do as I did.

I am happy to say that I have overcome this obsession with protein. This book is a detailed guide to my recovery. As you read through my journey you may think that I actually hate protein. In reality, how can you hate a macronutrient? Obviously we need protein. My concern is more with the fact that we no longer talk about food as food. Rather we are obsessed with breaking food down to its component parts and, in so doing, have developed an unhealthy obsession for one particular macronutrient. I am disturbed by the fact that protein has become a veritable nutritional rock star, omnipresent in our food and advertising like never before. We seemingly cannot get enough of protein, and this reality is leading us down a very dangerous road. In fact, “eat more protein” may be the worst advice that “experts” give to the public.

Whether you are seeing your doctor, nutritionist, or your trainer, protein is strongly advised. Should you happen upon a vitamin store you
will be inundated with pills and concoctions boasting higher and higher protein contents. Even our grocery stores are pushing new and interesting food-type substances that are loaded with protein, while the produce aisles get smaller and less inviting. Why buy an apple when you can get high-protein cereal bars, high-protein drinks, even protein in your vodka. Do people really think vodka laced with protein is healthy? The answer is most certainly yes. As a recent *Wall Street Journal* article puts it, “Protein on a label has what researchers call a ‘health halo effect.’ People assume the product will give them energy or make them full.” The article was appropriately entitled, “When the Box Says Protein, Shoppers Say I’ll Take It.” Most recently, a survey done by the International Food Information Council Foundation found that 63 percent of Americans are looking for protein foods when deciding what to eat, and a whopping 57 percent said they are trying to eat as much protein as possible!

Protein is everywhere. Big deal. So what is the problem? In a word: confusion. Some of us eat protein to lose weight, while others eat protein to gain weight. Ponder that paradox for a second. The same product sold to people to lose weight is relabeled and sold to others to gain weight! There are many who believe eating protein will make them healthier and help them live longer. And everybody seems to think protein will give them energy. Meanwhile, anyone who knows the basics of biochemistry or physiology will tell you that energy comes from carbs or fat, not protein. Possibly even more frightening is the fact that protein is one of the few food items that everyone seems to agree on. “Experts” argue about good fats and bad fats, or good carbs and bad carbs. This is very much part of the reason we are so confused about what to eat. But in protein we all seem to feel safe. No one would dare to argue that protein is bad for you.

Believe me, I am not writing this book because I dare to be different and buck the norm. I am not looking to be sensational, and I certainly hate to further confuse the public. However, given my experience, I am in a unique position to see that we have missed the forest for the trees. The fact is, our protein obsession is killing us and nobody seems to notice. This is not my opinion alone. I have done a tremendous amount of research to come to this controversial conclusion, and I will share with you what I have learned along the way. By the end of this book, you will see that the science shows that our protein obsession may be one of the main causes for the rise we are seeing in obesity, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. The United States is arguably the sickest first world country with
the lowest life expectancy, and we eat more protein than any other country. Protein very well may be to blame for our poor health!

Before you dismiss me as a fearmonger, I want you to ask yourself this simple question, “Is all this protein making us healthier?” In all my years in medicine I have never, ever, seen a patient who was suffering from protein deficiency. I have searched the medical literature and cannot find a single case of protein deficiency in someone eating adequate calories. In fact, if you are getting adequate calories, I am not sure there is such thing as protein deficiency. So how did we get from eating adequate protein to be healthy to our current state of super physiologic doses, and is this making us healthier? When will we finally see that a healthy diet doesn’t have to feature protein?

It’s been said that we don’t change when we see the light, but when we feel the heat. That’s how I finally woke up. A couple of personal health scares shook me so profoundly that I began to doubt what I’d been taught about nutrition in medical school—and what my colleagues continued to advise. Instead, I began to do the research for myself.

I was shocked to discover that none of the elements of the Protein Gospel were even a little bit true:

- Protein is not the key to weight loss—in fact, animal protein is one of the biggest factors behind the obesity epidemic, and, in virtually every study, animal protein is correlated with weight gain.

- Animal protein is not one of the healthiest foods around—rather, it is strongly associated with diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and cancer, the primary killers of our time.

- Plant-based protein not only exists—it’s much better for you than animal protein and all plants contain more than enough to support every one of your health needs.

- A lower-protein (and low-fat) diet is the most effective way to lose weight, improve your health, and prevent future disease.

- Carbs, far from being the enemy, are (in their natural state) the source of human health, vitality, and vigor.

After years of intense research, I could come to only one conclusion: People whose diets are high in animal protein have significantly higher rates of chronic diseases: hypertension, cancer, diabetes, heart disease,
and many, many others, including cataracts, diverticulitis, diverticulosis, inflammatory bowel disease, gall bladder disorders, gout, hypertension, irritable bowel syndrome, kidney stones, and rheumatoid arthritis. That’s what we know for certain. In emerging research (not yet conclusive), higher animal protein consumption is linked to poor mood, loss of mental concentration, and dementia.

This conclusion is supported by virtually every large-scale scientific study: massive efforts that followed thousands of people over many years in multiple countries around the globe. Study after study kept turning up the same types of correlations between animal protein, saturated fat, obesity, and chronic illness. When scientists compared people who ate meat with people who didn’t, the meat eaters were heavier, sicker, and more likely to die sooner. (I’ll give you more detail in Part II, “How We Became Proteinaholics.”)

Is Animal Protein Making You Sick?

So many of us—myself included—have spent years accepting our poor health as “normal.” How many of these symptoms do you have?

1. Are you overweight?
2. Do you have high cholesterol?
3. Do you have irritable bowel syndrome?
4. Do you have hypertension?
5. Are you constipated?
6. Do you suffer from diarrhea?
7. Is your skin marked with acne?
8. Are you often tired or lacking energy?
9. Do you have brain fog—problems with memory, focus, concentration?
10. Do you get sick often?

These symptoms might be common, but they do not have to be a “normal” part of life. They indicate imbalances and disorders that animal protein is either causing or making worse. In most cases, they will start to resolve within two weeks and be gone in a month or two—once you start eating a plant-based diet.
But it’s not just large-scale studies of human populations that support my conclusion—cutting-edge laboratory science has affirmed that clear biochemical mechanisms link animal protein to obesity, hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, as well as many other disorders, and to a shorter life span generally. As I pored through one journal article after another, I identified the key elements of animal protein—including amino acids, heme iron, insulin growth factor 1 (IGF1), and N-nitroso compounds—that were implicated in decreased longevity, premature aging, and the chronic disorders that plague our time.

As if that weren’t enough, human and animal studies all pointed in the same direction. In dozens of randomized controlled clinical trials, the gold standard in medical research, the more animal protein consumed, the worse the participants fared.

I reviewed thousands of original studies, and hundreds of meta-analyses and reviews. And all of my research kept pointing to the same conclusion: Consuming animal protein is linked to chronic disorders and premature death. Eating lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes is associated with staying healthy.

Protein Addiction

As the title of this book indicates, I think our society has a protein addiction. I want you to know that this isn’t sloppy language that serves to trivialize “real” addictions; I mean it quite literally and intentionally.

Sure, proteinaholism is different from an alcohol or drug addiction, mostly in that it’s socially sanctioned and doesn’t cause instantaneous functional impairment. But our obsessive and mindless overconsumption of protein fits the pattern of addiction, and its health consequences—for individuals and society as a whole—are no less serious in the long term.

I realized protein was a true addiction through the many counseling sessions with my weight-loss patients that have occurred over the last several years. They usually go something like this:

**ME:** So last time I asked you include more fruit and vegetables in your diet. Specifically we talked about having an apple for a snack, and starting dinner with a salad. How did that go?
PATIENT: I thought about it, but I realized if I ate the apple or the salad, I wouldn’t have enough room for the protein.

ME: But we talked about this at length. You don’t need so much protein. In fact, too much animal protein is the main reason you’re in my office.

PATIENT: I know, but I’m scared of not getting enough protein.

These patients panic when they even consider withdrawal. They cling to both the notion that protein is the King of Nutrients, and to the specific protein-rich animal foods that make up their daily intake. Asking them to deviate even a little causes them to respond much like an alcoholic whose friends suggest that he might be a bit out of control: “I don’t have a problem. Leave me alone.”

How Much Protein Are We Talking About?

Americans consume more protein than just about any other nationality: on average, according to the World Health Organization, around 130 grams per day (about 4.5 ounces). The National Health and Nutrition Survey estimates are lower: 102 grams per day for men and 70 grams per day for women.

Is that a lot or a little? Well, the recommended daily allowance (RDA) put out by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is just 56 grams for men and 46 grams for women.

Remember, these figures are grams of protein—not servings of meat. When you consider that a 4-ounce hamburger patty—which is pretty small by American standards—has 20 grams of protein, and a 6-ounce steak—again, pretty small, especially here in Texas—has 70 grams of protein, you can see just how much more protein we are eating than the RDA recommended levels. Those single servings blow the highest RDA out of the water, and most of us are consuming portions like this at each meal.

Lots of my patients will add a small amount of chicken breast to a lunch salad (3.5 ounces at 30 grams of protein) and eat a “healthy-sized” burger for dinner (8 ounces of beef patty for 40 more grams). They’ve already exceeded the RDA for adult men by 14 grams, and we haven’t even looked at breakfast, or snacks, or the cheese on the patty, the ranch dress-
I'm Garth, and I'm a Proteinaholic

ing on the salad, or the protein bars and shakes that help us “round out” our nutritional needs.

Here’s something else to consider: the RDA recommendations are actually optimal values, not minimal needs. Since some people require more protein than others, the USDA chose as their recommendation a value that assures adequate protein for 99 percent of the country. Based on the assumption that too much is safer than not enough (not true, as you’ll see), they actually overestimated by a bit what almost everybody really needs. There’s no real danger in that slight overadjustment, but when many Americans get double the RDA of protein, which itself is roughly double our true requirement, it becomes a big problem. (We’ll go into this in more detail in Chapter 15, “How Much Protein Do We Need?”)

To help you figure out where you are right now on the proteinaholic scale, here are a couple of sample menus and their protein values. The first is based on that National Health and Nutrition Survey, which found that U.S. men average 102 grams of protein each day.

- 2 large eggs (12 grams)
- 4 ounces of milk (for your coffee, tea, or cereal) (4 grams)
- 8-ounce hamburger patty (40 grams)
- 3½-ounce chicken breast (30 grams)

Does that sound like the way you eat? Or is your daily protein consumption more like this one, based on the World Health Organization finding of 130 grams protein/day?

- 2 large eggs (12 grams)
- 1 strip of bacon (3 grams)
- 4 ounces of milk (4 grams)
- 8-ounce hamburger patty (40 grams)
- 1 ounce of cheddar cheese (to make it a cheeseburger) (8 grams)
- 8-ounce fillet of salmon (48 grams)

During my proteinaholic days, I wouldn’t have seen any problem with these menus or numbers. I didn’t realize they far exceeded the U.S. government RDAs for protein. I didn’t realize the RDAs were themselves inflated...
for most people. I didn’t realize I was looking at a daily dose of animal protein high enough to be toxic.

If you had told me about our protein intake and the RDAs, I would probably have said something like, “Sure, we’re eating a lot of protein! That’s because it’s such a healthy food—and that’s why we Americans are the healthiest people in the world.”

The Healthiest People in the World?

It turns out my American pride in our superior health was seriously misplaced. According to a 2013 survey sponsored by the National Institute of Health and conducted by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, we are some of the unhealthiest people in the developed world (Woolf and Aron, 2013). We die at an earlier age, on average, than our European and Japanese counterparts. We have higher rates of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. And we suffer from more cancers. Our medical advances have slightly reduced our cancer death rates—meaning, we get cancer more often, but stay alive longer due to aggressive treatment—but basically, if it’s a war, cancer is winning.

The report concludes, “. . . the tragedy is not that the U.S. is losing a contest with other countries, but that Americans are dying and suffering from illness and injury at rates that are demonstrably unnecessary.”

So we eat more protein, spend more money on health care, and are some of the unhealthiest people in the developed world. That doesn’t prove that protein is the culprit, of course, but it’s a staggering piece of circumstantial evidence, especially when you look at the countries who are thriving and discover that they eat very little protein. The longest-lived people in the world get an average of 10 percent of their total calories from protein. Our average is as high as 15 to 20 percent, and of course, if you’re on a high-protein diet—Atkins, Paleo, or the diets recommended by many of my colleagues, and formerly by me—that figure goes up to 40 or 50 percent.

Compare that to the inhabitants of the island of Okinawa. They consume the vast majority of their calories in the form of rice and yams, those supposed “high-carb killers,” and get just 7 percent of their calories from protein. They live longer than Americans, have among the world’s high-
est percentage of centenarians (people who live to one hundred), and have far lower rates of obesity. Their old people are vigorous, active, and full of life. Only when Okinawans move to the United States does their health decline—or when they start eating at the U.S.-style fast-food restaurants that have begun to colonize their island.

We’ll look at more of the where the world’s healthiest people live—and what they eat—in Chapter 4. Even though this data doesn’t strictly “prove” that excess animal protein causes disease, it’s awfully suggestive. And it definitely contradicts the low-carb narrative that only through high-protein and high-fat diets can we possibly be healthy.

Do You Have to Go Vegan When You Recover from Proteinaholism?

In a word, no. Just because I’m a vegan doesn’t mean you have to be one. I do happen to think that the healthiest possible choice, both for our health and our environment, is to be a vegan—someone who consumes no animal protein whatsoever—and when you’ve finished reading this book, you may also.

However, to get the benefit of this book, you don’t have to go full-on vegan. Rather than becoming “anti animal protein,” I’d rather you take a stand “pro fruits and vegetables.” That is, the vast majority of the calories you consume should come from fresh, whole fruits and veggies; nuts and seeds; beans of all types; and whole, unrefined grains. By focusing on the healthy and delicious plant-based options, you automatically crowd the animal protein off your plate without obsessing over it.

And if you’re currently a proteinaholic, as I was, and as most of my patients are when they first come to see me, please take a deep breath and keep an open mind. As you’ll discover in the coming pages, plant foods contain all the protein you need, plus a boatload of other good things: antioxidants, anti-inflammatoryatories, vitamins, minerals, and other micronutrients. As long as the vast majority of your calories come from plants, you’re on the right track. (I’ll share my suggestions for what to eat in Chapter 16 and 17, which includes a sample meal plan with accompanying recipes.)

The key message here is not “zero meat” but rather “more plants.” More
than 100 percent dietary purity, I want you to shift your overall dietary pattern. Once you’ve read through the evidence, you can draw your own conclusions and make your own decisions as to how far you want to go. While evidence suggests that the closer you get to 100 percent, the better you’ll feel and healthier you’ll become, the slightly imperfect diet you follow is infinitely better than the perfect diet you won’t stick with.

**Breaking Through the Protein Myths**

We’ll explore and explode these myths in depth in Part III. For now, here’s an overview of proteinaholic myths and the facts that contradict them.

**MYTH:** A diet high in carbohydrates causes diabetes.
**FACT:** Carbs do not cause not diabetes. Meat and fat do. Yes, you read that right. Carbs don’t cause diabetes—not even sugar causes diabetes unless consumed in excess. It’s meat that leads to insulin resistance and rising insulin levels, a syndrome that is the number one precursor to diabetes and a major contributor to obesity.

**MYTH:** A high-carbohydrate diet predisposes you to heart disease.
**FACT:** Carbs do not cause heart disease—meat does. Meat raises bad cholesterol and clogs your arteries. Meat provokes a state of inflammation—an immune system response that, when it becomes chronic, underlines virtually every one of our chronic disorders, including heart disease. Meat provokes heart disease in many other ways as well.

**MYTH:** A diet high in carbohydrates leads to obesity.
**FACT:** Every large-scale study comes to the same conclusion—vegans (who eat no animal protein) weigh less than vegetarians (who eat some animal protein), and vegetarians (with their eggs and dairy products) weigh less than meat eaters (with their red meat, chicken, and fish). There is another category, “pesco-vegetarians,” who eat only fish and plant-based foods. Predictably, they weigh more than vegetarians and less than meat eaters. Carbs are not behind the obesity epidemic—meat and calorie excess is. Meat disrupts your intestinal bacteria, which leads to weight
I’m Garth, and I’m a Proteinaholic

Why I Wrote This Book

As a weight-loss surgeon who runs a large surgical and medical weight-loss clinic in Houston, I am on the front lines of the battle against obesity. I witness daily the negative impact of the so-called experts’ ill-designed diet plans as patients come to my office in dire need of help, having tried all the famous high-protein diet plans multiple times. I have treated thousands of people for obesity and obesity-related disorders, and I have learned what works and what doesn’t.

What doesn’t work is massive amounts of animal protein. What does work is a plant-based diet—not necessarily vegan, but featuring far smaller amounts of animal foods—with the vast majority of calories coming gain. Most meat contains antibiotics, which lead to weight gain. Meat creates acidosis and inflammation, which lead to weight gain. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg—we’ll explore the full story of protein and weight loss in Chapter 12 the chapter on obesity.

MYTH: Meat is only a health risk from animals raised on “factory farms.”

FACT: True, factory farming multiplies the problem, contaminating your meat, milk, or eggs with bacteria, viruses, antibiotics, and industrial chemicals. But archaeological studies, which analyze the bones of our ancient ancestors who never ate a single factory farmed animal, have found higher rates of cancer among those who ate more meat. And contemporary studies point to the same conclusion: Meat—even grass-fed, clean-raised, organic meat—is a carcinogen; that is, it contributes to the formation of cancer. Dairy products and eggs may also be carcinogens.

MYTH: Many cultures, past and present, have eaten a high-protein diet and thrived.

FACT: Throughout the history of our time on Earth, no culture that has thrived on a high-protein diet. Some cultures have eaten such a diet. But when they do, they do not thrive. Without a single exception, they survive while suffering higher rates of disease, disability, degeneration, and premature death.
from fresh, whole fruits and vegetables, along with nuts, seeds, beans, and grains.

In other words, the exact opposite of the diets my obese patients follow before they come to see me. Their diet logs are a veritable animal graveyard. Eggs and bacon for breakfast, a sandwich with a few slices of meat for lunch, some jerky for a snack, and chicken for dinner. The amazing thing to me, now that I’ve recovered from proteinaholism, is that despite the evidence of their own bodies, my patients continue to believe the same old myths: protein is good, and more protein is better. If I ask them why they think they’re not losing weight—why, in fact, their weight is going up—they never blame the jerky, the chicken, or, God forbid, the bacon. Instead they look ashamed and mutter, “Carbs.”

“What carbs?” I’ll say, looking at day after day without a single apple or a salad—since of course, fresh fruits and vegetables are carbs.

“Oh, I had some pizza on Tuesday,” they might say, looking sheepish and unhappy. Or, “There were those fries on Wednesday.” Or maybe even, “At Sunday brunch, I couldn’t stop myself. I had a donut.”

What’s wrong with blaming carbs for their inability to lose weight? First, the vast majority of calories from pizza, fries, and donuts come from fat rather than carbohydrates. Second, in focusing on these supposedly evil carbs, my patients let animal protein and saturated fats off the hook. When I tell them to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, it’s not that they actually object. They’re just so focused on getting more and more protein into their diets that they don’t have room for plant-based foods.

So I had to ask myself, why? Why did my patients cling so desperately to this notion that eggs and bacon and fish and chicken were such healthy foods, disregarding the watermelon and apples and kale and oatmeal that had become my own weight-loss staples?

In our world of Google and Wikipedia, we no longer have to worry about not having information. We have tons of it. Our challenge is to know what to do with that information and differentiate wrong from right. In the realm of nutrition, the anecdotal stories of miraculous cures and unbelievable weight loss have catapulted to the forefront. Meanwhile, science has been ignored or, worse yet, manipulated. The result is a belief in certain dietary practices that in reality are making us sick and fat.

There are some thoughtful experts writing books appealing to the public to stop thinking of foods as macronutrients but rather as whole foods. They are asking readers not to think in terms of how much pro-
tein to eat but rather to concentrate on eating whole natural foods. As Michael Pollan, author of the bestselling *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, so eloquently puts it, “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” The problem with this appeal to real food is that the public is so wedded to the concept of protein that whole foods have to be carefully examined for their protein content. Worse yet, the public believes that protein means animal protein. People either do not know that plant protein exists or, if they do, believe it is inferior.

And what do people mean when they say they are going to have “a protein” for dinner? What are beans, or avocados? They have protein, carbs, and fat. People give lip service to fruits and vegetables. We all agree that fruits and vegetables are good for us, though for reasons that drive me crazy, we add a disclaimer to fruits that they are only good “in moderation.” But while we might believe these whole foods are good, we do not believe that veggies or fruit are nearly as important as “protein.” In fact, we have developed a food calculus whereby we now compare one food to another. So we may nod our heads when experts argue that you should eat whole foods like a carrot or an apple, but in the back of our mind we are still questioning the protein content of the apple. Given this calculus we would rather eat a chicken breast or a protein shake. This incorrect emphasis on protein results in the fact that we only eat about 5 to 7 percent of our calories from fruits and vegetables!

We should be talking more about whole foods. The reductionist practice of breaking foods down to their component parts has really confused the situation. However, during the writing of this book I must be a reductionist. I cannot argue that the emphasis on protein is harmful if I do not roll up my sleeves and immerse myself into the world of reductionist nutrition. I need to take on protein mano a mano. Otherwise, no matter how much I tell you to eat an apple, you will always reach for the beef jerky, now available absolutely everywhere. More important, I also have to show you that there is a dramatic difference between the physiologic effects of plant versus animal protein.

I began to realize that for me and many of my patients, the transition to a plant-based diet required a huge reversal of everything we believed, much as Copernicus had asked the people of his time to give up the notion that the sun moved around the earth and to accept, instead, that the earth revolves around the sun.

After all, the protein obsession is one that just about every physician
promotes. Ten thousand diet books proclaim it (actually, an Amazon search for “low-carb books” just yielded 9,710 results, so please forgive the slight exaggeration). The Atkins industry and its spin-offs (South Beach, The Zone, Protein Power, etc.) trumpet it. The Paleo movement argues for it. A whole legion of fitness and lifestyle bloggers insists on it. And the cattle, pork, chicken, dairy, and egg industries fund our protein obsession to the tune of billions of dollars per year, paying for TV ads, commissioning biased studies, lobbying and threatening government officials, and creating the illusion that one of our most dangerous addictions is totally normal and safe.

A Labor of Love—and Penitence

I’ll be honest with you: I didn’t particularly want to write this book. As the head of a burgeoning weight-loss clinic and bariatric surgical practice, I have more patients than I can handle. I’m the very involved father of two young girls. I love spending time with my wife. Since my discovery of the plant-based lifestyle, I’ve taken to competing in marathons and triathlons (you’ll see—once you regain your health and vitality, the sky’s the limit!). Between my practice, my family, and my hobbies, I’ve got more than enough on my plate.

So I didn’t want to devote years of late nights, early mornings, and weekends to this book—but I had to. For three reasons.

First, and most pressing, I just couldn’t stand seeing one more patient come into my office, clutching her diet log, explaining to me that her past week’s weight gain was somehow due to eating “not enough protein,” even though she’d had eggs for breakfast, salmon for lunch, and chicken for dinner, consuming two or even three times the amount of protein in the already too-high RDAs.

Second, although painful for me to admit, I wrote a book that’s been part of the problem. In 2008, I published The Expert’s Guide to Weight-Loss Surgery. It did very well. It earned 4.5 out of 5 stars on Amazon.com. And it reached a lot of people desperate to lose weight and regain their lives. Every chapter in that book was meticulously researched, based on the best evidence available at the time. Except for—you guessed it—the one on nutrition. Without a second thought, I breezily recommended the
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Zone diet, complete with its ratio of 30 percent protein and 30 percent fat to 40 percent carbohydrates. (Nobody in the weight-loss community batted an eye, of course; I was only promoting what everyone else believed.) I couldn’t put that genie back in the bottle, but I could unleash an even more powerful and effective genie to help people regain their physiques and their health. You’re holding it in your hands.

And third, I couldn’t take one more day of looking at our shameful U.S. health statistics, in which more people are overweight than not—66 percent—and in which a full third of the population is obese. I couldn’t stand being a physician in a country that spends more on health care than any other nation in the world—and yet has the worst health statistics of any developed country. Our national obsession with protein is literally killing us: sapping our vitality, undermining our health, shortening our life span. I consider the current situation nothing short of criminal.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. The solution can be right there in your shopping cart, in your refrigerator, and on your plate—as soon as you understand how animal protein affects you and how to make a healthier choice. The solution can be in your doctor’s office, too, as the medical profession becomes better educated about nutrition and as more physicians begin giving their patients better advice. And the solution can be in our national policy, if we’re able to stand up to the billion-dollar budgets of the food industry lobbyists and their buddies at the USDA, and if we’re able to see past the ads proclaiming the health benefits of meat, milk, and eggs.

As a bariatric surgeon and recovering proteinaholic, I consider myself a fighter on the front line. Switching from hamburger and steaks to hummus and kale has enabled me to drop weight and turn into an Ironman competitor, stronger, faster, and healthier than I’ve ever been in my life. My irritable bowel syndrome cleared up. My cholesterol levels dropped to normal. My blood sugars are exemplary. My inflammation readings are excellent. A plant-based diet has been the gateway to a whole new life of health and vigor—and it’s done the same for my patients.

As a weight-loss surgeon, I see the heaviest people in the country, the ones for whom standard diet and exercise simply have not worked. When these people switch from overconsumption of animal protein to a healthy, plant-based diet, they experience the same things as me. Their pounds come off, this time for good. Their cholesterol levels drop. The blood sugars stabilize. Good-bye heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes. Hello, energy, stamina, and a healthy weight. Their biggest problem shifts from
having the energy to get up in the morning and face another day of pain, fatigue, and embarrassment to deciding how to spend their newfound zest for life. What they will do with their “one wild and precious life,” as poet Mary Oliver puts it.

Decide for Yourself

If you’re feeling skeptical as you read these words, I understand. My 2008 self would have been screaming BS! right about now. You and I and everyone have been programmed to regard protein as the perfect nutrient, the more the better. We’re sold compelling narratives (Paleo especially tells a great story about returning to our noble caveman roots and becoming “real” men and women once again). We’re intimidated by our doctors and other health authorities, not realizing that they have, if best, a layperson’s understanding of nutrition.

To switch to a plant-based diet, you have to make the journey that I made: from thinking that animal protein is the healthiest possible food to becoming aware of its many dangers. You need to see through the way the media, the food industry, and the medical establishment have sold you a bill of goods, convincing you—falsely—that animal protein should be the foundation of a healthy diet, and the more of it, the better. You need to understand the scientific debates over the effects of animal protein and to cut through the noise: the confusing, often dispiriting information culture in which you can find “evidence” to support just about any conclusion, so that you no longer know what to believe.

The mental part of this journey consists of two phases.

First, you need to know the research: What have scientists actually discovered? The entire body of nutrition research is huge and varied, and you can always find a study that contradicts everything else—or seems to. That doesn’t mean that “we don’t know anything” or “nothing is certain.” If you can find one hundred massive studies following thousands of people over many years that say one thing, and a single study covering only a few people for a few months saying the opposite, it’s pretty easy to decide which evidence to believe. So in this book, I’ll lay out that evidence and let you judge it for yourself.

Second, to cut through the noise, it helps to understand why the media
gets it so wrong. The way scientific studies are reported, it’s easy to become confused. Once you understand a few basic concepts about how to sift through the welter of information and settle on a few key facts, a lot of that “information anxiety” will disappear. Yes, it’s confusing for all of us—even for me, and I’m an M.D. who lives and breathes medical research and practice full-time. But there is a way to break through the confusion—to sort for yourself between the solid news and the hype—and once you learn how to do it, you will know the extraordinary relief of being able to come to your own conclusions.

That’s what I want this book to achieve: to enable you finally to feel confident that you know which foods are healthy choices. Then you can decide for yourself.

In these pages I’m going to take you on the journey I took myself, pointing out the overwhelming and consistent evidence for the dangers of animal protein and the virtues of whole fruits, vegetables, and other plant foods.

I’ll take you to a Siberian yurt and a Kyrgyz hut—showing you two cultures that live side by side on the steppes of Russia, one eating meat, one eating plants. Guess which one is healthier? I’ll give you a tour of Dr. Dean Ornish’s remarkable experiment, where he put men with prostate cancer on a plant-based diet and taught them how to reduce their life stress, and then compared their cancer’s progression with that of people who kept on eating meat.

I’ll show you how the cancer cells in a petri dish start multiplying at an explosive rate as soon as you add IGF1—a hormone that increases with increased animal protein consumption—and how those same cancer cells begin to shrink as soon as you add the blood of people who’ve been eating a plant-based diet. I’ll also give you the benefit of my many years of studying and applying it in a clinical setting.

Then, if you’re interested, you can use the meal plan and recipes in Chapter 17 to help you make the healthy changes that I have made—the same healthy changes that have helped hundreds of my patients.

I don’t expect you to take my word for any of this. We’ve all been exposed to far too many “diet gurus,” miraculous fat-shedding foods, flip-flopping media reports, and confusing debates to put our faith in anyone’s opinions anymore. Many people just tune it all out, shaking their heads and figuring, Might as well eat whatever I want; everything’s going to kill me anyway.
If you can relate to that remark or have thought it yourself, I don’t blame you. And I don’t want to make things worse by becoming just one more confusing opinion. Luckily, faith is not a required ingredient on your plant-based journey. Aside from all its other benefits, one of the best things about the plant-based diet is how quickly it creates meaningful and obvious improvement. So you can let your body convince you, so I don’t have to.

Sound good? Then let’s get started. The first stop on our journey is one of my finest public moments, when I was celebrated for my work as a committed professional proteinaholic. The reality of my situation, as you’ll see, was quite different . . .

This book has a companion website, Proteinaholic.com, that’s designed to help people transition to a healthy diet and lifestyle. With recipes, cooking tips, inspiring stories, research updates, and coaching support, there’s something for everyone.

You can start by downloading the free Proteinaholic Recovery Plan, including additional recipes, links to videos, and a simple step-by-step formula for improving your diet.

See you there!