



WILLIAM W. LI, MD

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
EAT TO BEAT DISEASE**

EAT
TO
BEAT
YOUR
DIET

**BURN FAT, HEAL YOUR
METABOLISM, AND
LIVE LONGER**

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By
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This book is dedicated to my parents, who guided me early in life to harness both the creative and the scientific as a way to find brighter solutions for the world around us.

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Introduction

I am not a fan of diets. Never have been. I dislike fad diets, crash diets, pop diets; in fact, any diet that promises massive weight loss “in no time at all!” Most popular diets are not based on science and don’t address the true basis for health—which you can’t see in the mirror. I am a physician and scientist, and my focus has always been on health, not vanity.

Eat to Beat Your Diet was written to bring you the real science that is missing from all those diet plans. Fighting body fat is vitally important for your health, but not for the reasons you might think. And food is not your enemy. In this book, you will learn through a remarkable set of discoveries backed by validated research studies that the right foods can improve your metabolism and strengthen your body’s natural health defenses. By the time you’re done, you’ll understand how to eat these foods to your advantage, beat back body fat, and optimize your health—all without ever needing to go on a “diet,” hence the book’s title.

Most diet books preach deprivation and lay out strict rules that take the fun out of your natural way of eating. Instead, I will tell you what foods to *add* to your life and how to enjoy them while healing your metabolism and getting you to your next level of health. Along the way, I’ll explain the latest science about how your metabolism really works (it’s probably not what you’ve been told), what your fat does to *support* your health, how shedding even small amounts of weight can have big health benefits, and why, regardless of your age, body type, or size, you do not need to deprive yourself of the joy of food while you are elevating your fitness and ability to resist and fight disease. This book is about mastering your health through metabolism while loving food at the same time. But along the way, you’ll also learn how to lose extra weight and shrink your waistline in meaningful and science-backed ways.

Eat to Beat Your Diet is a sequel to my last book, *Eat to Beat Disease*, in which I discussed how your body resists disease through its five health defense systems—angiogenesis, regeneration, microbiome, DNA protection, and immunity—and how specific foods can support one, two, or even all five of these systems at once. I described the evidence showing how more than two hundred foods can activate these defenses to help us avoid the diseases we fear the most: cancer, heart disease, dementia, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, and more than seventy other conditions, based on the new science of molecular nutrition. By *adding* these beneficial foods to your life, you can raise your health shields against disease. My main message is that some of the most powerful tools for improving your health exist naturally in the foods you eat; you just have to become aware of the complex ways your body responds to what you feed it. This book takes off from there and extends the connections between food and your health defenses to your metabolism and their interplay with body fat.

After *Eat to Beat Disease* was published, I received thousands of emails from readers telling me they felt more fit and had more energy after eating the foods I wrote about. They were happier and more confident about their health once they realized they could embrace food and not fear it. They said they felt empowered to take control of their health using the simple steps I described that they could implement at home. Some even let me know that they were able to stop taking their prescription medications after following the 5 × 5 × 5 plan I proposed in the book.

What caught me completely by surprise was that I also began receiving messages from readers who gleefully told me that they had succeeded in losing weight and slimming down in ways they hadn't experienced before. They were eating the foods I recommended, not starving themselves, and shedding pounds anyway.

Wait, I thought, they were not reducing their food intake. How could eating food lower their body mass and body fat?

Drawing on my years of research in medicine and physiology, I did a very deep dive into the science of body fat. I looked at the links between metabolism, fat (also called adipose tissue), and food. What I discovered was mind-opening: most of the ideas we

accept as fact about metabolism and fat are not true. Even doctors and nutritionists were getting it wrong!

For instance, you are not born with a slow metabolism that causes you to become fat. It's the other way around. Having too much body fat slows your metabolism. Another common misconception is that you don't need to worry about excess fat unless you are overweight or see unsightly bulges in the mirror. Medical research tells us that slim people can grow dangerous amounts of fat packed inside their bodies.

On the other hand, fat can contribute to good health, because fat is actually an organ. That's right, an organ just like your heart, liver, and lungs. In fact, your fat releases hormones that control the normal function of many of your other organs, even your brain. Fat is also an important heat generator in the body. A layer of it not only provides insulation against the cold; a unique type of fat called "brown fat" can burn away excess amounts of other fat around your middle and elsewhere. By burning fat for energy, brown fat *increases* your metabolism. Of course, fat is also a cushion, but it is so much more. The goal, then, isn't to rid yourself of all your body fat—you just need to tame it.



There are moments in everyone's life when a light bulb goes off in their head, and they hit on an important new insight that can change their world. These are the moments that scientists live for. For me, that moment came when I realized that the very same food compounds that activate your body's health defenses also trigger cellular actions that improve your metabolism and counter body fat. These compounds are called "bioactives," and I realized that they are key to why my readers were slimming down.

Probing even deeper into the science, I discovered there are multiple ways that bioactives can cause weight loss. Certain foods stop fat cells from expanding; others cause "bad" fat cells to become "good" fat cells; still other foods can redirect a fat stem cell, so it can't create more dangerous fat. Some foods even crank up your brown fat space heater, meaning that you can eat foods to trigger good fat to burn down bad fat. In other words, you can fight

fat with fat.

Not all calories are created equal, and my research proves it. Eating the right foods can help you improve and strengthen your metabolism and strip away excess body fat, all while improving your health. In this book, you'll learn about how these discoveries were made and you'll find a unique list of 150 foods I've identified that truly fight fat—all based on evidence from human studies.



When you look at my list of true Fat-Fighting Foods, it will be clear to you that taming your body fat doesn't require sacrifice and hardship. Quite the opposite: you can enjoy your food while eating to improve your metabolism. This might sound like a paradox, but science says it is not. Taming body fat also doesn't have to be expensive or complicated. Most of the foods on the list are found in your typical grocery store. And when I think about recipes and dishes that can be made with these foods, my mouth begins to water. Healing your metabolism can taste great!

I developed my fondness for tasty food growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a city once known mostly for its steel and glass industry but now recognized as a mecca of medical innovation (and some great restaurants!). Nestled among three rivers and 446 bridges, Pittsburgh is a place of diverse ethnic communities. When I was a kid, there was the annual Pittsburgh Folk Festival that took place in the Civic Arena, a now-defunct sports venue that had a retractable domed roof so unusual-looking that it was featured as a backdrop in multiple movies.¹

During the festival, the city's forty-odd nationalities, including Italians, Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks, Poles, Greeks, Chinese, and Filipinos, set up colorful side-by-side food stalls selling small plates of specialties from their homelands to hungry attendees. Enticing smells wafted through the entire venue. I loved sampling tasty bites of traditional cooking while listening to the hosts in the stalls describe the ethnic traditions behind each dish. Through these experiences and a network of family and community, my childhood was filled with flavors and stories of foods from around the world.

Decades later, I still revel in the pleasure of eating. It is

something I look forward to every single day, ranking right up there with enjoying good health. What many people don't realize is that those two goals—relishing food and enjoying health—are one and the same; at least, they should be. Based on my more than three decades of scientific research, I know that the right foods can activate the body's power for healing. And contrary to what you might have heard, the foods that are most effective at activating health can also deliver the greatest pleasure. Eating for health can dazzle your taste buds and bring new gustatory delight to your life.

When it comes to eating for both pleasure and health, I look to two parts of the world I have come to know and love: the Mediterranean and Asia. Both regions are, of course, renowned for their delicious and diverse cuisines. The healing power of food is, literally and figuratively, baked into their food cultures. Much of what is known as modern Western medicine had its origins in Italy and Greece. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, was from the Greek island of Kos. His "Hippocratic Oath" is still recited by every medical student on the day they graduate and assume the title of physician. The word "physician," in fact, comes from the Latin *physica*, meaning "natural," while the word "doctor" comes from the Latin *docere*, meaning "teacher."

Nutrition was used for healing when Hippocrates lived in ancient Greece, and the quote "Let food be thy medicine, and medicine be thy food" reflects the thinking of his time.ⁱⁱ Ironically, most physicians today are woefully undereducated about modern nutrition. Few are knowledgeable enough to share a proper understanding of food and health with their patients. Medical school education emphasizes the importance of pharmaceuticals for treating disease over natural solutions to maintain health. As a result, generations of doctors have drifted further and further away from medicine's roots, where nutrition was once a key tool in a doctor's toolbox.

Food is also central to health in Asian cultures, which have some of the oldest medical systems in the world. Chinese medicine dates back more than three thousand years and is rooted in the concept that your health is the result of balanced forces known as yin and yang. These balances are influenced by the properties of different foods. One of the earliest-known medical textbooks was assembled by Sun Simiao, who was regarded as China's "King of Medicine."

His book *Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Pieces of Gold* was written during the seventh-century Tang dynasty, a golden era of Chinese culture. Simiao devoted an entire section of his textbook to food therapy, including recipes, lists of medicinal herbs, and recommendations for modest eating. Today, medicine in China is a progressive blend of traditional healing approaches mixed with modern biomolecular therapies.

The Mediterranean and Asia may seem worlds apart in their traditions, yet two thousand years ago, a remarkable land route called the Silk Road connected these two regions and their foods. This passage served as one of the most influential trading channels in human history, allowing goods, ideas, and ingredients to be exchanged between many different countries and cultures. Established during the Han dynasty, the Silk Road was responsible for the movement of many familiar foods that we eat today from China to Western countries, and vice versa.

I started thinking seriously about these food cultures during a gap year I took before starting medical school. I was interested in learning how food influenced culture, society, and health—so I traveled first to Italy and Greece (this was long before the Mediterranean diet became popular) and then to China to see for myself. Living and eating with locals in Lombardy, Liguria, Veneto, Mount Athos (I embedded myself as a visitor to Greek Orthodox monasteries and even volunteered to help cook Easter feast in one of them!), and the Cyclades and then in Hebei, Shanxi, Sichuan, Hunan, and Jiangsu Provinces planted the seed of an idea in my mind that I later developed into my own style of eating, which I call “MediterAsian.” It combines the best of both worlds and uses many of the delicious, metabolism-mending ingredients that you’ll learn about in this book.

MediterAsian is how I eat every day, with my food choices inspired by the traditions that span these cultures. I’m going to describe my approach to you and give you some recipes that come from my own kitchen using fat-fighting ingredients that I love to eat. The MediterAsian approach makes it easy to improve your health, inside and out.

I wrote this book for anyone who can benefit from a better metabolism—and that's everyone, well, everyone who wants to live a longer life filled with greater enjoyment. Whether you are young and fit, in your middle adulthood, or in your senior years, you can apply the new science of body fat, using food to pump up your metabolism and perform at your personal best.

If your doctor has said that you should lose a few pounds, or if you've been struggling to gain better control of your weight, this book will give you a way to achieve your goals while finding (or gaining!) pleasure from your meals. And especially if you have a chronic health condition, fighting excess body fat will help you use your metabolism as a tool to combat diseases, such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, autoimmune conditions, dementia, and more. Healing your metabolism heals every part of your body.

Having said all this, it's only fair for me to state who this book is *not* for.

This book is not for a crash dieter, or someone who wants to lose a huge amount of weight in a matter of days, or someone whose only goal is to get a slim beach body, no matter what the cost to their health. If you are looking for a quick and temporary fix that will surely result in a rebound, please look elsewhere. My goal in this book is to help you use your metabolism and body responses to food as a way to lose fat and gain health—with durable benefits.



Eat to Beat Your Diet has three parts. In Part 1, I tell you about how your body fat is connected to your health defenses and how fat supports your health in absolutely essential ways. You'll learn how fat develops while a fetus is still in the womb, how it sculpts your body as you develop from a baby to child to teenager to young adult and beyond, and how fat behaves differently between men and women in some ways but acts the same in many others. Then, I share new findings about human metabolism that may upend everything you think you know about food, fat, and energy. You'll learn about the power of brown fat as a metabolism healer and how we know that food can activate it to combat fat. *Yes, you really can*

eat to beat fat! In fact, I reveal to you the many fat-fighting bioactives found in foods and explain how they tame fat in different, powerful ways.

In Part 2, I take you on a virtual shopping trip to the grocery store to show you how easy it is to find the foods containing these powerful bioactives that improve your metabolism and rightsize fat. We travel to the different sections of the store, from the perimeter to the middle aisles, where you can find many surprising metabolism-boosting ingredients. I highlight the foods that have the greatest scientific evidence for fighting body fat, and I single out the ones I like the most for a delicious MediterAsian approach to eating.

In Part 3, I give you a few coaching tips and a specific plan for how to begin your own MediterAsian program to tune up your metabolism. The plan is both personal and flexible, and I'll show you how to get it started, keep it going, and adapt it to the inevitable changes that you will encounter. It is a plan to establish and maintain a healthy metabolism for your whole life.



To get the most out of this book, I recommend that you read the chapters in order and not just jump to Part 3 where the MediterAsian plan is. By reading Part 1, you will reframe your entire understanding of body fat and metabolism and how they work together. Before moving on to Part 2, take in all the reasons to respect your body fat and digest the implications of how you can use food to elevate your health. When you read Part 2, you'll learn about all the foods that are beneficial for your metabolism. If this is your own physical copy of the book, use a pen to mark all the foods that you already enjoy or the ones you find interesting and would like to try. If you picked it up at the library, you can snap some photos with your cell phone so you can quickly find the foods you want to remember when you go to the grocery store. Finally, do a quick full read-through of Part 3 to familiarize yourself with the entire plan before you dive in and try it, then go back and read the instructions and tips on how to maximize its benefits.

Once you are familiar with all the steps of the MediterAsian plan, choose a time when you can work it into your life. Use the QR code

in Part 3 to get planning guides, practical tips, and updates that I will provide as the science advances.

Get ready for a new life experience. You will transform your metabolism with my sustainable anti-diet approach to food, health, and enjoyment. You will discover it is possible to love your food *and* love your health at the same time—I'm about to show you how. In the spirit of MediterAsian eating, I say to you:

Buon appetito, kalí órexi, and gan bei (干杯)!

Footnotes

[i](#) *The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh* (1979); *Sudden Death* (1995); *Rock Star* (2001); *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008); *She's Out of My League* (2010).

[ii](#) Scholars have determined this is an attribution and not a direct quote from Hippocrates. However, the idea of “food as medicine” was certainly accepted during his time.

==== PART 1 ====

HOW FAT WORKS

Our body is a machine for living. It is organized for that; it is
its nature.

Let life go on in it unhindered and let it defend itself.

—*Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace*

CHAPTER 1

The Surprising Science of Fat, Health, and Disease

If the word “fat” triggers a strong emotion when you hear it, you’re not alone. Our language is filled with words like “overweight,” “obese,” and “heavy” that can bring about judgment, discomfort, disappointment, and even fear. We wince when we see the fat on our frame in the bathroom mirror. It makes us feel less healthy. Even in the grocery store, we feel a negative reaction when we see a rind of fat on a cut of meat in the butcher section. Fat has a bad reputation—but I’m here to tell you that fat is not the villain we’ve made it out to be.

The truth is, fat is one of the most important tissues in your body. It stores the fuel that your heart needs for pumping, your liver needs to detoxify your blood, and your kidneys need to remove waste and extra fluid from your body. In fact, fat is essential to every organ’s functioning. Without any body fat, you would look skeletal and haggard—ultraskinny is a shocking look—and if you stopped eating, you’d run out of life-sustaining energy and die within a couple of months. If you had no food, your body could draw on its fuel reservoir of fat to help you survive—which would be depleted to zero in nine weeks for a woman and seven weeks for a man of average build.¹

Fat insulates you like a sweater when you are exposed to the cold, and it cushions and prevents your internal organs from rupturing if you take a fall. More surprising, science has revealed that fat itself is an actual organ. It releases hormones and chemical signals that control your brain, heart, immune system, and virtually all your body’s health systems. Fat is not to be feared but rather respected, although we do need to keep it under control.