

# The latest, strangest eating disorder

An obsession with eating "healthfully" can lead down a dangerous path, a doctor contends in a new book.

BY LYDIA STROHL

**S**TEVEN BRATMAN, now 45, was so bent on eating healthfully that he made himself sick. When he was a kid, his mom kept him from eating foods that might provoke his allergies to wheat and dairy foods. As a young adult, he became an organic farmer, restricting his diet so severely that it began consuming him: He skipped dinners with friends and family for fear their "wrong foods" might cross his lips, spent hours planning and preparing meals, and chewed each morsel 50 times.

Flash-forward a decade: Bratman finishes medical school and opens a practice that blends mainstream medicine with his natural-foods background. Soon, he meets patients on diets so strict it seems not just crazy but harmful. It was like looking in the mirror:

Bratman has put a label on this new eating disorder: orthorexia nervosa, which occurs when a person becomes obsessed with the *quality* of the food — not the *quantity* (as with anorexics). As opposed to healthy eaters, orthorexia sufferers adopt progressively more rigid diets, deficient in food groups and crucial nutrients, which can ultimately cost them their overall physical and emotional health.

"To be so obsessed with food has a madness to it," says Bratman, a physician in Fort Collins, Colo., and author of the new book *Health Food Junkies* (RANDOM HOUSE, \$23.95). "These people give up their ability to live normally, subscribing to the myth that if you don't manage to follow these strict diets, you are a failure."

Like bulimia and anorexia, which together affect 5 million Americans, orthorexia is essentially a psychological problem, Bratman says: Sufferers control food to serve a hidden agenda. Some fixate on healthful food or an eating regime to stave off aging or to address medical conditions, such as allergies or heart disease; others want to create a virtuous, healthy identity for themselves. And some use food as an excuse to skip family or social gatherings.

"There's nothing wrong with experimenting with diet. It's a powerful tool," Bratman says, adding that eating natural fruits, vegetables and whole grains is the healthy ideal. "But if fascination with diet extends beyond the results of the diet, if you think it makes you a better person, if you think eating a certain way will take your problems away, that's orthorexia."



His patients came to orthorexia via different paths: Many started out following some of today's most popular diets, such as the Zone and Atkins plans. Others had food allergies and initially felt better after cutting out a few offending foods; but they gradually cut out so many foods in the belief it was helping their symptoms that they ended up existing on turkey and rice. Some vegetarian patients became food fanatics. And others believed in food theories that involve spirituality, such as raw foodism and macrobiotics.

**S**till, some health experts don't think it's a huge problem. "It's a funny idea that being obsessed with eating healthfully is a disorder," says Kathleen Zelman, a registered dietitian and American Dietetic Association spokeswoman. "What diseases does eating healthfully cause? ... We wouldn't want to see people take this as a liberty to ditch healthy eating habits."

Others think orthorexia deserves closer attention. "I have no numbers, but orthorexic behavior is probably as common as the other eating disorders. Perhaps more common, as it is less extreme and promoted as allegedly good behavior," says Thomas E. Billings, a vegetarian for more than 30 years and whose Web site,

## Are you a health food junkie?

1. Do you spend more than three hours a day thinking about healthy food or your diet?
2. Do you plan tomorrow's food today?
3. Do you care more about the virtue of what you eat than the pleasure you receive from eating it?
4. As the quality of your diet has increased, has the quality of your life diminished?
5. Do you keep getting stricter with yourself?
6. Do you sacrifice experiences you once enjoyed to eat the food you believe is right?
7. Do you feel an increased sense of self-esteem when you are eating healthy food? Do you look down on others who don't?
8. Do you feel guilt when you stray from your diet?
9. Does your diet isolate you socially?
10. When you eat the way you "are supposed to," do you feel a peaceful sense of total control?

How many times did you answer "yes"? If two or three, you are a bit orthorexic, says Steven Bratman, M.D. Four or more, you're orthorexic. If you answered yes to all 10, you don't have a life; you have a regime.

beyondveg.com, is a forum for former food fanatics.

"At least monthly, I hear of patients becoming so rigid that eating becomes more destructive than the initial disorder," says Leslie Bonci, director of sports nutrition at the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Sports Medicine and also an ADA spokeswoman. She recalls a woman who asked how to help her husband, who was on the Ornish diet, highly touted to prevent heart problems. "He had gone off the deep end and lost 50 pounds, but he didn't view it that way. His wife's efforts to help were met with: 'You're not as pure as me. You're trying to sabotage my good efforts.'"

Indeed, Bratman says the hardest step is cajoling people to admit their obsessions. Once they've done that, it's generally just a matter of time before they can relax their strict standards. But it may require psychological help.

After years of abstinence, Bratman still can't enjoy cheesecake, though he does like such previous no-nos as barbecued ribs. The secret: No diet is perfect, he says. "'Perfect' doesn't allow for enjoyment. If you deprive yourself of hanging out with your pizza-eating friends, it's not healthy. If you live to 104 with a grimacing boring diet, what fun is that?" **EW**