Joel Fuhrman, bestselling author and radical nutritionist (he once cured a heel injury by fasting for 46 days), says all you need to do to live an optimally healthy, disease-free life is eat pounds and pounds of vegetables every day. Can you live with that?
The key scene in a health-and-fitness guru’s biography is almost always the “Eureka!” moment that launches him from obscurity to self-help superstardom. Charles Atlas was skinny and poor until he discovered the chest-expanding secrets of Dynamic-Tension. Dr. Robert Atkins was fat and unhappy until he stumbled across the waist-melting wonders of low-carb eating. Dr. Joel Fuhrman, whose radical ideas on nutrition have made him one of the most influential diet doctors in America today, followed, as he usually does, a different path. Fuhrman was already famous as a world-class pairs figure skater, competing on the same amateur circuit as Dorothy Hamill and other future Olympic medalists, when, in 1973, at age 20, he suffered a life-changing heel injury. “I couldn’t take any impact on it, couldn’t jump and land on it,” Fuhrman says. “I couldn’t walk for almost a year.” We’re seated in his offices in a bland corporate park in exurban New Jersey, a suite that looks more like someplace to sign papers for a mortgage refinancing than the global headquarters of a health revolution. At 58, Fuhrman is still in excellent shape, a point that he illustrates by pausing midsentence to lift his shirt, flash his well-defined abs, and frog-jump up and down off his desk, an apple in each hand.

His default facial expression is a smirk that he usually does, a diorama of the chest-expanding secrets of Dynamic-Tension. Dr. Robert Atkins was fat and unhappy until he stumbled across the waist-melting wonders of low-carb eating. Dr. Joel Fuhrman, whose radical ideas on nutrition have made him one of the most influential diet doctors in America today, followed, as he usually does, a different path. Fuhrman was already famous as a world-class pairs figure skater, competing on the same amateur circuit as Dorothy Hamill and other future Olympic medalists, when, in 1973, at age 20, he suffered a life-changing heel injury. “I couldn’t take any impact on it, couldn’t jump and land on it,” Fuhrman says. “I couldn’t walk for almost a year.” We’re seated in his offices in a bland corporate park in exurban New Jersey, a suite that looks more like someplace to sign papers for a mortgage refinancing than the global headquarters of a health revolution. At 58, Fuhrman is still in excellent shape, a point that he illustrates by pausing midsentence to lift his shirt, flash his well-defined abs, and frog-jump up and down off his desk, an apple in each hand. His default facial expression is a smirk that implies he possesses an important secret, which he may. With a little more hair, he could pass for 15 years younger.

When the U.S. Olympic Committee’s orthopedist urged Fuhrman to undergo an experimental surgical procedure for his heel, Fuhrman refused. He sought treatment instead from Herbert Shelton, a San Antonio naturopath who specialized in irregular cures. Fuhrman, a fit 150 pounds, was put on a regimen of only water for 46 days. “They nearly killed me,” he says. “I fasted down to 88 pounds.” His heel trouble vanished, but so did most of his muscle, and he was unable to regain top form in time for the 1976 Olympics.

A less-farsighted man might have sued Shelton for malpractice. Fuhrman — who’d watched his father use natural methods to rid himself of obesity, osteoarthritis, and back pain — saw an opportunity for a second act away from the ice rink. He earned a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania, specializing in nutritional medicine, and, in 1995, published the alt-medicine manifesto *Fasting and Eating for Health*. The book laid out the unorthodox, roughage-heavy rules for maximizing wellness that Fuhrman has since refined and expanded upon for an ever-widening audience. In June, the revised edition of his best-known work, *Eat to Live*, hit number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Judging by its cheery, colorful cover, which promises “Lose 20 Lbs. or More in 6 Weeks” and bears a ringing endorsement from celebrity physician Dr. Mehmet Oz (“A medical breakthrough…. There is no question in my mind that it will work for you”), *Eat to Live* ought to be a typical diet book. A reader who cracks it open expecting WebMD-style advice about counting calories and taking the stairs more often might be surprised to learn that the author preaches something closer to fruititarianism or Christian Science than to conventional medical wisdom. In Fuhrman’s world, the number of calories one consumes is far less important than the types of food he or she ingests. Low-carb, high-protein diets are not only unhealthy, but they will also almost certainly hasten one’s death from an unpleasant disease. Olive oil should be avoided, and the Mediterranean diet is practically a sham. A slow metabolism is preferable to a fast one. “Why would you want to speed up your metabolic rate?” he asked me, throwing his hands up in disbelief. “You’re aging yourself!”

Fuhrman’s number-one predictor of whether someone will get cancer isn’t family history; it’s what that person puts in his mouth. “Your genes play a very small role,” he says. “And nutrition has the power to overwhelm genetics. The medical profession and the masses have absolved themselves of all responsibility. They think drugs are the answer to everything.”

Fuhrman isn’t a crunchy holistic thinker. He’s a data-analysis guy. He speaks in a combative tone underscored by a medium-thick New York accent and sketches little charts and diagrams to illustrate important points. Fuhrman says he has reviewed 20,000 journal articles on nutrition, culling the most important information from each. Out of this collected wisdom, tested on thousands of patients over the years, he has devised a simple...
NUTRITARIANISM is part of a growing school of research-based dietary thinking that insists that, in terms of wellness, you really are what you eat. Call it plant-based libertarianism. The U.S. has the world's highest healthcare costs—$2.7 trillion in 2011—while consistently scoring lowest among developed nations for quality of care. Practitioners of plant-based libertarianism believe that every person needs to take full responsibility for his or her own health. This means adopting a wellness-focused diet, mostly vegan.

Comprehensive improvements in diet have long been shown to reverse, slow, or prevent what are called “diseases of affluence,” largely self-inflicted maladies like obesity, coronary heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes. More recent research suggests that such dietary improvements also combat Alzheimer’s and cancer. This movement shares some of the life-extension dogma of the calorie-restriction crowd and a little of the anti-agribusiness, eat-local moralism of writers like Michael Pollan (The Omnivore’s Dilemma) and films like Food, Inc. Its primary concern, however, is wresting control of America's health back from the insurance and drug companies and returning it to the hands of citizens. As Fuhrman puts it in Eat to Live, “only you, not your physician, must take responsibility.”

“In the future, it’s going to become more and more impossible for the economy to support how expensive medical care is and the number of sick people we have,” Fuhrman says. “Why don’t we just get our population healthier so we don’t need medical care?”

Along with Fuhrman, the leaders of plant-based libertarianism include nutritionist Dr. T. Colin Campbell, co-author of The China Study, and his comrade-in-arms Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, a cardiovascular surgeon. Last year, Campbell and Esselstyn starred in the hit documentary Forks Over Knives — the title reflects a preference for dietary intervention over the surgical variety—and published a bestselling book of the same name. Perhaps the biggest brand name in the field is Dr. Dean Ornish, whose near-vegan diet helped Bill Clinton drop 24 pounds following a second coronary surgery. Fuhrman is something of an outlier among this group in that he argues that small amounts of fish, eggs, and low-fat dairy are permissible so long as a person cranks up the rest of his diet to meet the ultrahigh nutritional benchmarks set by the H=N/C standard. “The right raw materials can...double or triple the protective power of the immune system,” he writes in his latest book, Super Immunity: The Essential Nutrition Guide for Boosting Your Body's Defenses to Live Longer, Stronger, and Disease Free.

The nutrients that most interest Fuhrman aren't found in supplements or multivitamins. He focuses instead on the immunity-boosting power of micronutrients. These include antioxidants and phytochemicals, which he calls “the most important discovery in human nutrition in the last 50 years,” though most of them have yet to be named or even identified. The foods highest in micronutrients per calorie are unprocessed plant foods, mostly fruits and vegetables, which make up 90 percent of an ideal nutritarian diet. In Fuhrman's system, calorie-dense olive oil (nine points) scores lower than white bread (18 points) because its phytochemical load is so low relative to its fat content.

“If you want ideal health, you need to overcompensate and eat an excellent diet,” Fuhrman says. He estimates that if all Americans were to adopt a nutritarian diet, “the immediate impact is that cancer rates might decrease by half. But the long-term impact, over generations...” He picks up a pencil and draws a downward-sloping line. “If we get kids eating right, we could decrease cancer rates by 90 percent.”

Like most evangelists, he maintains few barriers between his professional and personal life. At least one patient recalls arriving for an initial consultation and receiving an invitation for her family to swim at the Fuhrman home in New Jersey later that day. Fuhrman’s wife, Lisa (age 53; looks a very fit 40), manages his online business and co-stars in his cooking DVD. The four Fuhrman children, ages 10 to 24, (continued on page 115)
have been raised on a plant-based diet but are allowed to make their own food choices outside the home. According to their father, they almost always stick with the program: “One of my daughters once joked that for her, a cookie would be like shooting up heroin or smoking pot.” Fuhrman often cites his children as examples of the benefits of nutritarianism — he cannot recall a single ear infection or case of the flu among them. Unlike most family practitioners, Fuhrman gleefully picks fights with other doctors, particularly those whose diets he disagrees with. “The Dukan Diet, the one Kate Middleton was on? That’s the stupidest diet in the world,” says Fuhrman, scoffing at the high-protein plan.

The competitive fire that once drove Fuhrman as a skater is now largely channeled into marketing. Drfuhrman.com offers free nutritarian eating plans, with consultations, for overweight brides-to-be who wish to lose 50 or more pounds by their wedding day and are willing to provide a testimonial online “and possibly in magazines and on television.” Fuhrman’s “3 Steps to Incredible Health” special — essentially a stylish infomercial for nutritarianism — has become a staple during the self-improvement bloc of PBS pledge drives. As an author, Fuhrman has one distinct advantage over virtually all his neighbors in the diet-book aisle at Barnes & Noble: He is an entertaining writer with a gift for plucking fascinating facts and figures out of dry journal articles. (Two random examples: Three servings of cruciferous vegetables per week lower the risk of prostate cancer by 41 percent. Linebackers are six times as likely as endurance athletes to die young.)

If you’ve set foot in a Whole Foods, you may have noticed that the fruits, vegetables, and dairy products are labeled with an ANDI (Aggregate Nutrient Density Index) score, a number calculated with Fuhrman’s H=N/C formula. (Leafy greens, like kale, low in calories and packed with phytochemicals, score a perfect 1,000.) “In my 31 years at Whole Foods, these scores are one of the biggest successes we’ve had,” says Margaret Wittenberg, the company’s global VP of quality standards and public affairs. “There’s times we’ve had stores run out of kale.” Fuhrman also recommends large quantities of onions, garlic, berries, and mushrooms, all of which he credits with anticancer properties. “Women who ate mushrooms in China had a 64 percent lower incidence of breast cancer,” he says, citing a recent study. “That should’ve been on the front page of the New York Times.”

Micronutrients, Fuhrman contends, are also one of the unacknowledged keys to understanding the American obesity epidemic. Americans get less than five percent of their calories from unprocessed fruits and vegetables that aren’t white potatoes; 62 percent of our calories comes from nutrient-poor processed foods that are usually loaded with carbohydrates. Fuhrman believes that we overeat these foods not only for the dopamine rush they supply but also in a futile attempt to make up for a micronutrient deficit. The more junk we consume, the more toxins, like free radicals, amass in our tissues. “We become addicted to this toxicity buildup like it was cocaine or nicotine,” Fuhrman says. “When we try to stop eating, we get withdrawal symptoms.” These include the gnawing sensation in the stomach, irritability, and light-headedness that 99.9 percent of us would identify as hunger.

Fuhrman says these pangs are fake signals, an overriding of natural appetite that should kick in only once the body has exhausted its glycogen stores. The not-unpleasant sensation he calls “true hunger” is felt in the throat, neck, and mouth rather than the belly. It can be satiated by consuming almost any healthy food. Any urge that might qualify as a craving is, by Fuhrman’s definition, a sign of food addiction.

THE IDEA THAT a restrictive diet might hold the antidote for all modern ills isn’t new. In a famous 1939 study conducted by the Rockefeller Institute, a thousand rats were fed a diet equivalent to that of the average American. The rodents developed 39 different diseases of affluence akin to those seen in the human populace. Another thousand rats were fed a calorie-restricted, raw-food diet modeled on the ascetic customs of a long-lived tribe in the Himalayas. Not one rat in the second group became sick in two and a half years. That story actually did make the front page of the New York Times.

Yet our faith that science will develop a pill or procedure to cure whatever ails us is unshakable. Since the Human Genome Project began spilling the secrets of DNA a decade ago, many of our hopes have been tied to the potential discovery of particular genes linked to specific disorders that, once decoded, will offer road maps for doctors and drug researchers to follow. But the potential of gene therapy as a cure for cancer remains limited. One comprehensive review of cancer-prevention research estimated that only five to 10 percent of cancers resulted from inherited gene defects. The same study found that 30 to 35 percent of cancer deaths are “linked to diet,” with an additional 10 to 20 percent linked to obesity. Prostate cancers had a 75 percent dietary cause.

“We know that cancer is a preventable disease that requires changing lifestyle,” says Bharat Aggarwal, a professor of experimental therapeutics at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. “No matter which cancer you pick, they’ve (continued on page 117)
found out at least 200 to 500 genes have gone wrong. That means 200 to 500 pathways. The drug industry knows how to target only one pathway at a time. Natural products hit multiple pathways, so they slow down the progression of the disease.”

Fuhrman is flabbergasted at the amount of money going into cancer-cure research. “We’re not going to find a magic cure for cancer,” he says. “We’ve got to prevent it.”

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“There’s a perception that you can eat as much protein as you want,” Fon tana says, “and it’s safe and healthy. Our data shows that probably this is not correct.”

Joel Fuhrman wrote that “healthy eating can live longer, healthier lives. The question comes to the link between diet and health, Americans not only expect to have our cake and eat it, too, but we also insist that our doctors prescribe something to undo the consequences of our gluttony. In the months after meeting Fuhrman, as I tried to weave some of his dietary precepts into my life, the second-biggest story in health news was First Lady Michelle Obama’s inexplicably controversial initiative to encourage kids to exercise and eat more vegetables. The biggest health-news story was that the FDA had granted preliminary approval to a new anti-obesity drug.

Fuhrman puts forth a convincing case that by making some fundamental dietary changes — sacrifices, really — Americans can live longer, healthier lives. The question is, can we live with that?