

Keeping Healthy on 30 Cents a Day for Food

New York Doctor Tells How She Manages to Spend Only That Much for Three Square Meals Consisting of First-Class Viands

By Dr. Mary K. Isham.

WHEN I was asked to write an article on how I was living on 30 cents a day in New York during these times of advanced prices, and yet keeping in a healthy, active, and apparently happy condition, I thought it unwise to appear in print on a branch of experience not directly related to my specialty. The mere fact of spending so little would suggest that I am in desperate straits and therefore not able or fit to attend to my proper calling. Still the desire to write my experiences took a strong hold, and I have convinced myself that just how I do live on 30 cents a day is intimately connected with many pertinent questions of psychiatry.

If working excessively for a sense of security and spending undue time in preparation for the future is an expression of the neurotic constitution, then recklessness and total unpreparedness mark an opposite extreme—that of imbecile stupidity. When you learn that thieves have invaded the home of your near neighbor and stolen quantities of precious jewels, you take an inventory of your own domicile and make preparations for the disappointment and consternation of thieves. You do so, if you are not stupid. Perhaps you are neurotic, perhaps not. Most persons are, according to the standards set by psychiatrists.

When the dangers of a long war are upon us, it is only common sense to take account of our resources and test our capacities—only an approximate test, to be sure. The gain in a greater sense of security will aid us in combating any condition more effectually. So, about a year ago, I decided to make a test of my food situation and find out what could be done easily, comfortably, and healthily by one who did not make the practice of household economics a regular business and was occupied with other interests.

To begin, I do not live on 30 cents a day, inclusively. I used the word "live" loosely, and was only counting the cost of food material. And I forgot to add my regular weekly bill of 42 cents for milk, which makes \$2.52 a week. If the ice bill ought to be counted, too, then 37½ cents a week should be added. The gas for cooking costs only a small fraction of a cent a day, so that is negligible. But if you count the gas, why not the cost of the stove, the cooking utensils, and everything in the kitchen or apartment either directly or indirectly connected with the cooking, serving, and eating of food? There must be a limit somewhere, and this I make by including only what is bought to be used as food taken by mouth. Generously counting in the ice, a small portion of which is actually ingested, brings the daily cost of food material to a fraction over 41 cents. This is also the total daily cost of food, for I select, carry home, (unless too bulky,) prepare, cook, serve, and eat my own marketing.

All my groceries are bought at a high-class store, and it has never been necessary to throw a scrap away on account of its being unfit. If there were more persons to provide for, and food could be bought in larger quantities, I am quite sure the pro rata could be brought down to 30 cents. However, the experiments in dieting on the police force and many others of a less official character have readily proved that the per capita cost of a group of persons can comfortably be brought down to 25 cents daily, or even less. But my story is of entirely different conditions. Eating alone is commonly thought to breed dyspepsia and melancholy, but, like every other opinion on any matter whatsoever, that one is not wholly or always true. The ill-nourished, queer, dirty recluse becomes so, not because he lives alone—there are plenty of folks just as abnormal who do not live alone—but through an inner contention, in the same way as every other depressed dyspeptic develops his suffering, whether he sits at a long family table of carefully computed and reg-

istered caloric fare, or at his own lone shelf of marasmic melancholy.

In order to enjoy a menu at so small a cost, and to be well nourished by it, one must have a natural appetite for plain and wholesome fare. The preparation of my menu requires very little time, for I do not care for heavy meats, hot bread, puddings, or pastries, except occasionally. Cooking and eating are merely a diversion. Even in this day a great many persons think that the consuming of three big meals a day is the proof and means of health, and that the more they eat the better. A patient of mine complained of symptoms which he thought inexplicable. They happened to be ordinary symptoms of indigestion. He said that was impossible in his case, for he had an enormous appetite and never suffered pain in the gastric region. He could easily consume a whole club steak at one sitting, and much else besides. I asked him if he enjoyed the taste of his food. He did not make a point of the taste, he said, but always ate until he had a heavy feeling, and then he knew that he had sufficient nourishment. He derived great satisfaction from the fact that his stomach was closely packed with nutritious food, and felt securely braced against ill health and early dissolution. The simple matter of cutting down the superfluous amount of fuel, eating more slowly, and masticating each morsel more thoroughly eliminated the physical discomforts of which he complained. But before he was convinced of his error sufficiently to make a permanent and radical change in his dietary habits it was essential to explain why his idea of nutrition was erroneous, and to go further back and find out what instinctive components of his nature urged him to seize upon this particular idea.

The number of physical ailments following, resulting from, or coincident with, psychic misdirections is very large. The mental attitude is an exceedingly important factor in the present war economy campaign in regard to food, and success in it lies in maintaining a maximum degree of national health with a minimum consumption of food. This must largely be accomplished by freeing the healthy appetite, so that whatever is eaten may be more easily converted into body tissue. We must pay as much attention to appetite values as to caloric values. Painstaking work on food values expressed in calories, however, is developing a better standard of health. The knowledge which is now being consciously and laboriously worked out will in time be applied mechanically. But caloric value may become an obsession which will eventually assist in causing indigestion. There are many caloric fanatics who travel from one health resort to another. Frequently they are much improved after each visit. Whether the diet, or belief in the diet, or change in the surroundings, or lack of responsibility—not to mention a host of other factors which might enter in, as the extra attention received by the patient, or his fetich-like attachment to certain things in his ceremonial environment—which or how many of these cause the improvement it is hard to tell. But many of these guests or patients, as soon as dismissed, make preparation for another flight into artificial conditions. A number really like to juggle with food

units, but others are seeking things quite concealed, sometimes known only to themselves, but more often known neither to themselves nor others, unless an application of the new psychology happily discloses it to them.

If I had to worry over the balancing of food values for myself, a large part of my energy available for perfectly good nutritional activity would be consumed by irritation. I am more than willing, however, to encourage those useful, patient, reliable, individuals who feel called to work on diagrams, schedules, charts, tabulations, statistics, formulae, and recipes, and when their results are so easily applicable as not to destroy the appetite they shall be the pilot of my daily fare.

It has been proved by a thorough Freudian analysis in some cases—I do not know how many, but the number is constantly increasing—that symptoms of indigestion are manifested because the sufferer from indigestion uses the troublesome article of diet as a symbol, a substitute object, a carrier for repressed emotions or wishes, struggling to gain fulfillment in disguised form. Sometimes the obverse of wishes, fears, are struggling for expression in this way. The sufferer is not aware of this state of affairs until the whole associative maze is untangled. Then the digestive disturbances disappear. Eggs, milk, cucumbers, bananas, apples, and tomatoes are symbols which often give trouble. If any one, following the lead of the new psychology, had the patience to study the myths of a nation in connection with its diet and food taboos, very probably he would find a close relation in the symbolism of both and much enlightenment regarding the national physique. And underlying the whole relationship would be revealed the national wish as the slow agent of national evolution.

A recital of my own methods and personal tastes during the year in which I have been performing easy and pleasant household economics would be tedious. For one thing, I save every edible particle, provided it pleases my taste, since I can have dishes prepared to suit me and am not forced to eat for pure filling, for politeness, or because there is nothing else to do.

As to what is eaten instead of discarded, I wish to emphasize the fact that the average person eats much more than is good for him. We ordinarily eat more than the metabolic balance requires, and thus compel part of the bodily energy to eliminate waste in excess of the waste amount, making room for new tissue. Some excess waste is desirable, but too much hampers assimilative efficiency. My simple, inexpensive, but palatable fare would not be sufficient for any one engaged in hard muscular labor, and it would not satisfy the epicure, but it is sufficient for maintaining the health of an active adult.

Today's program is typical. I arose at 6:30 A. M. and dressed for the day. After eating a bowl of steamed whole wheat with milk and sugar I set my apartment in order, washed and ironed a dress, and went out to attend to some professional business which required about a mile and a half of walking. Returning at 1:30 P. M., I was hungry, but not faint, for luncheon, which consisted of three cheese sandwiches, a large glass of iced, whiskyless eggnog with a few

drops of vanilla instead, and a big banana. I was busy in my office all afternoon, and at 6:30 P. M. ate my quickly prepared dinner. The menu was two slices of beef loaf, baked yesterday; boiled corn on the cob, a plate of combination salad, three slices of bread and butter, coffee, half a sugar melon, and two wafers of chocolate peppermint. Before retiring I usually take nothing; sometimes a glass of milk and a few crackers. During this hot weather I find that plenty of plain or buttermilk lemonade keeps me in better humor.

Occasionally it has happened that when dismissing a patient at 6:30 o'clock in the evening and expecting another at 7:15 o'clock—with the intervening three-quarters of an hour free for getting-dinner, eating it, putting away the dishes, and reading the evening paper—I have hurried into the kitchen and found nothing provided for this enjoyable repast. I have then eaten enough bread or milk or eggs, or whatever else was at hand, and could not detect any injurious results. Such moments teach one "the exquisite taste of common dry bread." The detection of a fine flavor in food is a most important preliminary aid in digestion. In fact, there is a real material "appetite juice" which has the same good physiological standing as the other gastric juices, and it is inhibited when the appetite fails. It is quite possible that under certain conditions of glad expectancy the multitudes could be fed on even less than the few loaves and fishes for a long time, and no harm done.

Of course, at present the idea in regard to the food problem is not centred in the mere cutting down of expense, for such a procedure would seriously cripple industry. The purpose is to conserve as much food as possible for future use and to learn the ropes of national economy. We wish to convert the perishable into imperishable whenever possible, and to encourage the present use of what is perishable, as fruit and fresh vegetables, and the use of what is practically inexhaustible, as fish. But in times of great stress the expense is a most important consideration, and it is well to have a fair estimate of what can be done. If one can easily live on a certain amount under present conditions, then most certainly, with less ease and more thought, one can live on less.

Fortunately the appetite increases with the hunger up to a degree below actual starvation, for thereby better digestion is promoted, and very coarse food, considered unappetizing in time of peace and plenty, becomes most palatable and digestible in time of war.

I hope no one will interpret this article as an attempted argument for preserving a standard of living just this side of the starvation level. Its principal motive is that digestion must wait on appetite, as it has done for ages, and that appetite can be kept alert by a wholesome interest in something above the level of mere food values. A whole host of unhappy health seekers take too much thought of what they shall eat.

A suggestion about how one can economize pleasantly and healthfully is: Give the mind another bill of fare. Make economy an avocation instead of a vocation. Too constant and forced attention spoils both the doing and the pleasure of doing. I am speaking of one's special economies in private life. Of course, if one takes up the matter as a professional economist or efficiency expert in a particular line, then the numerous and continuous currents of interest flowing in from all directions keep the attention almost constantly at work without much effort, as in any well-selected vocation.

Soon I shall take a vacation from this avocation and with an appetite most keenly alive shall feast upon viands in good official standing—quarts and quarts of large, luscious cherries, plenty of thick, rich cream for cereals, broiled lobster and soft-shelled crab, club steak with mushrooms, (a small portion), boned breast of guinea fowl grilled with shavings of boiled Virginia ham, and Nesselrode pudding.