

# Epidemiology Studies Pave Path to Health

PERSONAL PURPOSE AND EDUCATION  
STEERED ME TO THE NHA DIET AND LIFESTYLE

by Gary Giovino, PhD, MS

I returned home from college in May, 1974, in worse shape healthwise than when I matriculated in 1970. Four years of institutional food, minimal exercise, a newly established addiction to cigarettes, and poor sleep habits were not healthful, to say the least. Back at home, I started to exercise more and ate somewhat more nutritiously, so I began to feel a little better. Then my dear mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. She lived for four and a half years, which is a very long period of survival for lung cancer, but she suffered more than I would wish on anyone.

In 1976, I decided to study cancer epidemiology at the University at Buffalo's Roswell Park Cancer Institute Graduate Division. I was fascinated by the field, and I wanted to see if I could help my mother in any way. I'd found Linus Pauling's work on vitamin C and cancer, and she supplemented two grams/day, which I think helped a surgical scar that wasn't healing to do so. Also, while I was pretty sure that smoking was dangerous, I wanted to read the actual scientific studies that contributed to that conclusion. I was hoping to find some problems with them to justify my continuing to smoke. I know that sounds odd, but it's true. After listening to lectures by a world-renowned epidemiologist and reading the published studies, I decided I needed to quit. It wasn't easy, but with God's help, I broke free. Forty-one years later, I am very glad I did. Over the years, I've also learned to value whole-food, plant-based (WFPB) nutrition, physical activity, stress reduction, quality sleep, and social connectedness.

As difficult as it was, my mom's passing helped me to discover my purpose, which

was learning more about health and how to prevent disease and promote health at the individual and population levels. Professionally, I've run stop-smoking clinics, taught physicians how to help their patients quit smoking, managed a study of one of the first telephone quit lines, and evaluated tobacco use in the United States and throughout the world.

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During the same Cancer Epidemiology 501 class in which I learned about smoking and disease, I also learned that high intake of red meat and low fiber intake were associated with colon cancer. I was outraged, as I thought I grew up eating the best American diet with lots of red meat. Eventually, however, I realized that I was personally passionate about nutrition. Early in my health journey, I read books and magazines I'd discovered at the local health food store, including *Let's Live*, a magazine that featured writings of leaders in the natural hygiene movement. I experimented with various diet styles including the



original Atkins diet, megadosing vitamins, and macrobiotics. For years, my wife and I settled on the Prudent Diet of Ernst Wynder.

About 20 years ago, I heard T. Colin Campbell, PhD, speak. I appreciated his scientific findings and his references to the clinical work of Drs. Ornish, Esselstyn, McDougall, and others. After hearing him speak, I turned to the WFPB approach and have experienced many benefits. More recently, I have become interested in researching the hypothesis that suboptimal nutrition is a risk factor for nicotine addiction. Time will tell if it's true. All the work on diet and the gut-brain axis seems relevant.

I support the National Health Association because I value the clinical experiences and published studies of many of the leaders. I also like the work that Mark Huberman is doing, especially with the magazine, the annual conferences, and the building of community. I hope that more and more people adopt the NHA lifestyle, which, in addition to the personal benefits for friends and family, will create multiple wins for the planet, animals, and our nation's economy. Finally, as an epidemiologist, the increase in the number of people who follow the whole-food, plant-based diet and lifestyle will increase the probability that they can be included in epidemiological studies, which would facilitate better comparisons than we currently see in most of the nutritional epidemiology literature. And the more people who apply healthy, plant-based nutrition, the more physicians will be exposed to wonderful health transformations, which hopefully will influence their personal and clinical practices. So, for many reasons, I wish the NHA a long and healthy future! 🌱