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Interview with Dr. Neal Barnard

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **DR. NEAL BARNARD** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 191.*

JASMIN: There's a recent story in JAMA Neurology that -- I don't even know if I'm going to be able to pronounce this, but thankfully we have an expert who's about to explain this to us. This is called -- and you might need to help me with this, Mariann -- this is called "Effect of Apolipoprotein E Genotype and Diet on Apolipoprotein E Lipidation and Amyloid Peptides." And this, in other words, is about the role that nutrition plays in Alzheimer's disease. So, we've all heard of that. Many of us have experience with family members going through Alzheimer's disease. And there's some brand new studies coming out about this that are really groundbreaking.

And I'm thrilled about the guest who is gonna come on right now to tell us about what's going on. And that is Dr. Neal Barnard, who heads up the Physicians' Committee for Responsible Medicine.

Welcome back to Our Hen House, Dr. Barnard.

NEAL: Thank you, it's great to be back with you.

JASMIN: It's such a pleasure to speak with you. Mariann and I have been discussing recently the role that nutrition plays in certain ailments and diseases that affect us, especially as we grow older. This is something I'm particularly interested in because I've been watching my darling grandmother age, and she has a largely vegan diet and I'm always wondering how that affects her. I know that you've been talking a lot about nutrition and Alzheimer's specifically. And an article recently came out in JAMA Neurology, and I was wondering if you could elaborate a little bit for our listeners on the role that nutrition plays in preventing Alzheimer's disease.

NEAL: You're right. Well, first of all, let me say that I'm hoping that people will think about this if they're concerned about Alzheimer's and the things that occur in later life. But not *just* that, because let's say, you're 25 years old and you're feeling a little brain fog here and there. Could your diet be playing a role even when you're young? And there are a whole

bunch of reasons for why we think this is the case. But this new article just adds the evidence, in a completely new way.

So, the background is, in observational studies -- in Chicago, there was a big study called "The Chicago Health and Aging Project." They showed that when people ate a lot of animal fat -- whether it's pork fat or chicken fat or any kind, the saturated fat, the bad fat -- it dramatically increased the risk of Alzheimer's disease. Several other studies have shown the same thing. And what we think is going on is that these bad fats, along with the high cholesterol level that you're gonna get from eating meat, somehow that turns on this nasty machinery inside the brain, where proteins are produced that tend to cluster together in little -- microscopically -- they almost look like little meatballs in the brain. So people who are eating more of these fats, they have these aggregations of protein forming in their brain. It's frightening if you see them on a microscope, but they're there. That's what we had thought had happened.

So the new report, here's what happened. They didn't just observe people. They brought in individuals to their study and they actually gave them high-fat diets or low-fat diets. And lo and behold, that's exactly what they found, is that the people who had the higher fat diet, even over a short period of time, a couple of weeks, their brains were cranking out more of this toxic protein. So, this was done at the University of Washington, a relatively small study, 20 participants, but it was enough to clearly show the effect of a high-fat diet.

So here's my bottom line: For a long, long time, people have said meat is bad for you. It's got cholesterol and fat that's gonna clog the arteries to your heart. It's got a lot of unnecessary calories in it that come from its high fat content; that's gonna pad your waistline. It's gonna increase your risk of colon cancer. But we now have pretty solid evidence that this same kind of way of eating that is rough on your heart, and rough on your body in so many other ways, takes a big part of the blame for brain problems. So everybody who's saying, "Okay, all right, I've had enough. I'm gonna get the animal products off my plate. This will help my heart, this'll help my waistline," yes, it will. But it will also help your brain, according to the best evidence we have. So, it's a very exciting time now to realize all the good things that can come from a healthy diet change.

MARIANN: This is really exciting news, and I say that -- this is a subject that has particular meaning to me -- this is Mariann -- because my mother suffered from dementia for many years before she died. It was a very tragic situation, and of course one that frightens me. But when can people start addressing this? Does this mean that they have to have been eating vegan since they were kids, or can this -- is this something that you think can be addressed even by people who are along in life?

NEAL: Well, first of all, let me say I'm sorry to hear about the situation that you had, and I can relate personally. My father died last year and it was as if he had died 10 years earlier.

JASMIN: Oh, I'm so sorry.

NEAL: He was a sharp guy, but his memory was starting to fade. And he was well aware of it, and he was very disturbed by it. But as time went on, it just got worse and worse and worse and worse. And when he finally died, you hate to say it, but it's almost a blessing in a way because he was just not himself. And he was miserable every minute of the day. But it's not just your family and my family. For our listeners, everybody knows somebody who's had this happen. And we have pretty much just accepted that there isn't a darn thing you can do about it because it relates to old age or it relates to genes or something like that. My message is, no, it doesn't relate to old age or to genes. This is a disease process, and even the genes that are linked to Alzheimer's disease, when people change their diets, it's as if those genes are suppressed. So, we're really excited about the fact that we've got tools we didn't used to have.

JASMIN: Yeah, it sounds like there's a lot of tools out there, and some of these tools you talk about in your book, *Power Foods for the Brain*. I'm excited to see that this has been getting the attention of mainstream media. You've been on the Doctor Oz show; you've been on the Ellen DeGeneres show talking about these.

MARIANN: You've been on Our Hen House.

JASMIN: We're gonna *make* you, Dr. Barnard. Can you just give us a nutshell version of what are certain power foods that we should be paying particularly close attention to?

NEAL: Yeah, you've got, first of all things to get away from, then things to add. The things to get away from, you already know. You don't want to eat the animal products; that's bad. They are high in saturated fat; that's bad fat. But also, a lot of snack foods are high in trans-fats -- doughnuts, snack pastries. Avoid those. They are just as bad as the animal-derived saturated fat. So, if you're on a plant-based diet, you're gonna do way better than the meat eater. But there is still plant-based junk food too that some people are making. You know what I'm talking about.

JASMIN: Yeah.

NEAL: So, the things to add, to really emphasize, to start with the basics, you want to have vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans. Those should be your four staples: vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans. Within that group, there are a few things I emphasize. Sources of Vitamin E -- that can be spinach, it can be mangoes -- but also a little bit of nuts and seeds is good. Don't go crazy with it, maybe an ounce. That's a small handful of sunflower seeds. Throw them on your salad or something like that. That gives you Vitamin E. Vitamin E has been shown to cut Alzheimer's risk by about half, if you get a good, adequate supply of Vitamin E each day, which is easy to do. Green leafy vegetables are high in folate. Beans and bananas are high in B6. And don't forget to take a Vitamin B12 supplement. Everybody needs that and I don't want an argument with anybody that, "No, no, my food should give me everything." We don't live in nature anymore, so that is the one supplement everybody really ought to be taking. But those together, the folate, B6, B12.

JASMIN: Excellent. Well...

NEAL: They actually counteract brain shrinkage, so make sure you don't miss them.

JASMIN: Wow, I didn't even know. That's excellent. So if people go to PCRM.org, there is, right on your homepage, a whole section about Alzheimer's and dietary guidelines. And what we love about PCRM is not only are you putting out this incredibly important information about how to be optimally healthy, but you also really are extremely concerned about animal rights. And you have so many campaigns going on that really help to end the horrific exploitation of animals, including chimpanzees and farmed animals, and thank you. We can't thank you enough for all of the work you're doing and the awareness you're raising. And I will read more about what's going on with PCRM on your website, and I look forward to reading *Power Foods for the Brain*. So thank you, Dr. Barnard, so much for joining us today on Our Hen House again.

NEAL: It's been my pleasure. Thanks for all the great work you're doing.

JASMIN: Thank you. How cool is it to have Dr. Barnard on again?

MARIANN: Yeah, and he had another breaking news story for us as well.

JASMIN: Yeah, right after we stopped recording, he of course kept telling us good news. And I quickly hit "record" and I asked him if we could air that, and he said "yes, *please* do." And this is a breaking story.

MARIANN: Yes, and a very exciting one. Everybody has been concerned about this issue for a long time, and there's been enormous success on this front. But I'll let him tell you about it.

JASMIN: Let's go back to Dr. Barnard.

NEAL: Let me give you one more piece of news that just hit me. I just learned this -- half hour ago.

JASMIN: Go.

NEAL: As you know, we have been struggling to get animals out of medical education so that doctors are not trained on a dog or a pig or a goat, because if they *are* trained on that, they think it's essential. And they become sort of proponents of animal research. But if doctors do not train on animals, they don't see it as necessary. So back when PCRM started there were 127 medical schools in the US and nearly all of them had required animal labs for medical students. And so we had chipped away at that, until now there are five. Well, just this morning I learned that the military medical school in Bethesda, Maryland -- it's called the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences -- just stopped all of its animal labs for medical students. So you can now, not only become a physician, but you can be a military doctor without touching animals, period. And so out of 127 medical

schools, 123 of them don't use animals, period, in training their doctors-in-training, so we're delighted about that.

MARIANN: That is really great news.

NEAL: We just learned that this morning.

JASMIN: Excellent! Hot off the presses. Well, we'll definitely--

NEAL: Hot off the presses, we've got four bad guys left out of 127.

JASMIN: So that's pretty cool!

MARIANN: Great news, really great news.

JASMIN: Really fantastic news, and thank you Dr. Barnard for joining us in Our Hen House today, again.