

# Rickets Returns?

Carl Ferré

**Dear Carl,**

*We've had a few worried mothers e-mail us after reading the "Rickets Returns with Faddy Diets" article in the Telegraph newspaper. "Rickets, once the scourge of Victorian Britain, is back. According to the latest edition of The Lancet . . . Macrobiotic diets, for example, are not ideal for young children. They exclude dairy produce, meat and wheat, all excellent sources of vitamin D and calcium."*

*Can you shed some light on this issue? Have you come across macrobiotic children with rickets or with malnutrition?*

*—Jamie Trevena  
United Kingdom*

**Dear Jamie,**

Thank you for your question and for bringing this important subject to everyone's attention. I have to admit that I was very shocked by the portion of the *Telegraph* newspaper article that was included in your e-mail because it would be careless at best for the editors of *The Lancet*, a respected medical journal, to allow such an unfounded assertion about macrobiotic diets. In fact, searching *The Lancet* database, it appears



that the authors of the article do not mention macrobiotics at all. Thus, your statement/quote from the *Telegraph* newspaper needs to be corrected. The statement about macrobiotic diets was written by the author of the article, Thea Jourdan, and does not come from *The Lancet* article, as far as I can determine.

What is from *The Lancet* article is that hundreds of children are now being treated each year for rickets, and the following quote from co-

author, Brian Wharton. "Possible reasons include prolonged exclusive breast feeding, extensive use of sunscreens, increased use of day care facilities and unusual diets that provide little vitamin D and calcium." The most clear explanation of the cause and "cure" of rickets that I have been able to find comes from the December 1970 edition of *Scientific American*, in which Professor Loomis writes:

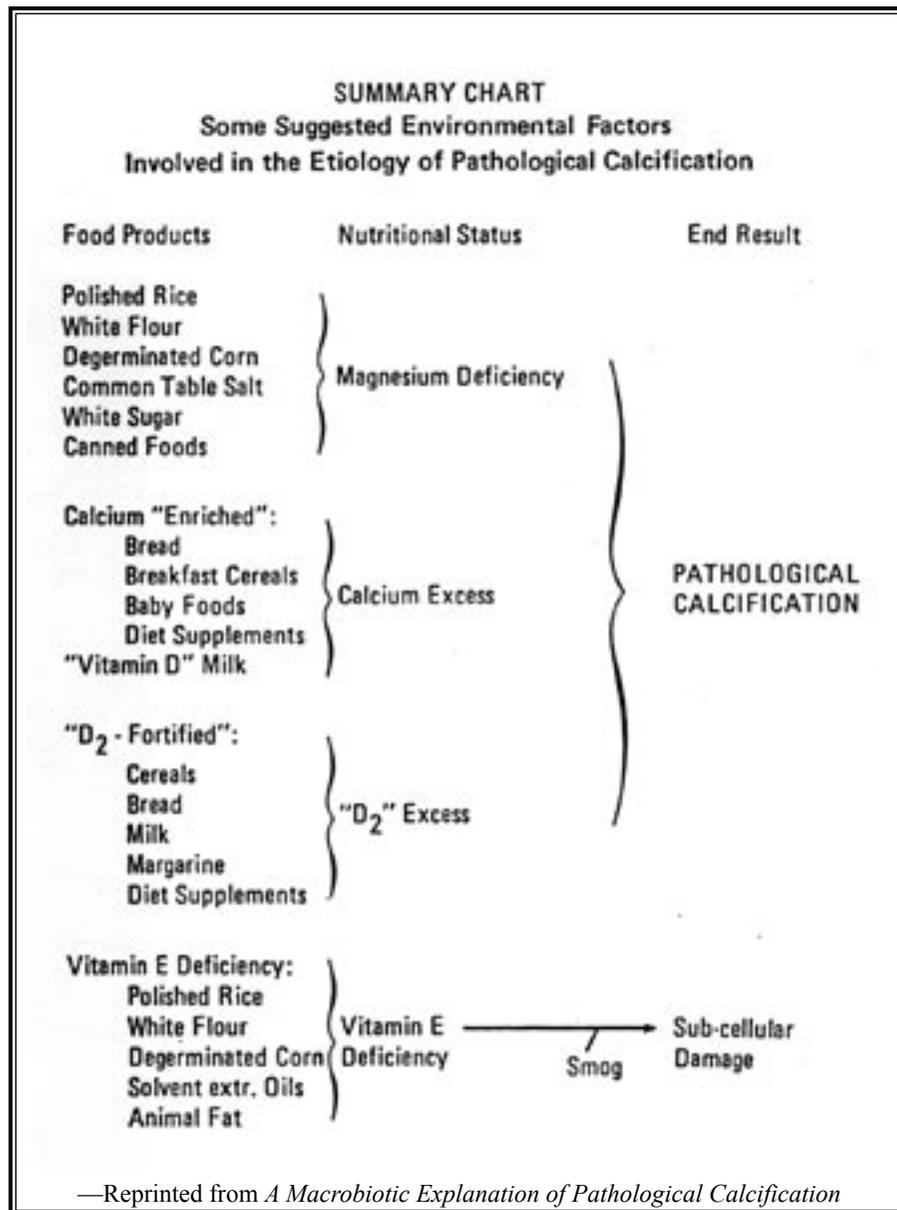
"The great discovery of the cause and cure of rickets is one of the great triumphs of bio-chemical medicine, and yet its history is little known. Indeed, it is so little known that even today most textbooks list rickets as a dietary-deficiency disease resulting from a lack of 'vitamin D.' In actual fact rickets was the earliest air-pollution disease. It was first described in England in about 1650, at the time of the introduction of soft coal, and it spread through Europe with the Industrial Revolution's pall of coal smoke and the increasing concentration of poor people in the narrow, sunless alleys of factory towns and big-city slums. This, we know now, was because rickets is caused not by a poor diet but by a deficiency of solar ultraviolet

radiation, which is necessary for the synthesis of calciferol, the calcifying hormone released into the bloodstream by the skin. Without calciferol not enough calcium is laid down in growing bones, and the crippling deformities of rickets are the consequences. Either adequate sunlight or the ingestion of minute amounts of calciferol or one of its analogues therefore prevents and cures rickets, and so the disease has been eradicated.”

Thus, I am surprised that the authors don't include increased air pollution as a possible reason for rickets' return. Also, with the proliferation of computers, televisions, other indoor activities, and more comfortable indoor environments, it follows that children are spending less time outdoors. This fact, coupled with the over-consumption of fast, fatty foods, has led to a greater problem than rickets among our young; namely, obesity.

In my opinion, the inclusion of "Vitamin D Fortified" foods in one's diet is potentially more hazardous than excluding them. Jym Moon's book, *A Macrobiotic Explanation of Pathological Calcification*, contains a good summary chart and it is reproduced in this response because it shows some factors involved in the etiology of pathological calcification.

Before looking at the specific quote about macrobiotic diets, there is a sentence in the *Telegraph* newsletter article that is of great significance. I refer to the following quote by Dr. Martin Ward-Platt, consultant Pediatrician at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In the paragraph immediately following the one about macrobiotic diets, he writes: "It is possible to get the recommended daily allowance of vitamins on these diets, but it is much more difficult." This represents a great step forward as for years we have read how macrobiotic diets are insufficient nutritionally.



During my almost thirty years of macrobiotic practice I have never seen or known anyone personally who had rickets. However, I have heard of studies and cases within the Dutch macrobiotic community many years ago, and I have seen infants and children who appeared to be undernourished, or suffering from what could be termed "malnutrition." Thus, I think the article is of great benefit as it does raise issues with which macrobiotic practitioners should be concerned.

In order to answer your question

completely, we must look at a common misconception about macrobiotics, both within macrobiotic circles and without. When a person begins macrobiotics, they often use a basic macrobiotic diet and choose foods from lists of those "approved" and those to "avoid." Many times the person begins macrobiotics because of an illness and thus they are advised to further limit their food choices. This limited, or restrictive, diet is then what is called "a macrobiotic diet," or even "the macrobiotic diet."

Macrobiotics, like life, is not stagnant. A truly macrobiotic diet is one that changes daily as one's condition, needs, and purpose changes. Problems can arise if one follows a restricted diet for too long a period of time or if one follows such a diet when it is not necessary. In other words, we must not confuse a diet designed for temporary use by a sick person with one that should be eaten by healthy persons.

Once macrobiotic principles are learned, one can choose from an even wider variety of foods. One of the goals of macrobiotics is to create people who can think for themselves rather than those who make choices based on what is written in a book as "allowed" or to "avoid." Once one gets to an advanced understanding, one knows how to use good-quality meat and non-chemicalized dairy foods, provided so-called "vitamin D" has not been added, within a macrobiotic practice.

Now we are ready to examine the quote regarding macrobiotic diets. Author Thea Jourdan writes that macrobiotic diets, "exclude dairy produce, meat and wheat, all excellent sources of vitamin D and Calcium." First, by "wheat" I would think she meant refined flour products. These are often fortified with vitamin D and calcium. Eating foods such as dairy products, that have vitamin D added is not wise as Jym Moon, PhD, author of *A Macrobiotic Explanation of Pathological Calcification* made clear in his article "Vitamin D Tragedy" in the November/December 2003 issue of *Macrobiotics Today* magazine.

Here is a quote from my book, *Pocket Guide to Macrobiotics*, about vitamin D: "Vitamin D is made by the cholesterol-related substances in skin when it is irradiated by the sun's ultraviolet rays. Of the more than twenty different forms or analogs of vitamin D, only vitamin D<sub>3</sub>, available from sunshine, is natural.

Milk is fortified with vitamin D<sub>2</sub>, a non-natural analog. Some believe vitamin D<sub>2</sub>, actually a steroid, is the root cause of many disorders, and that products containing it should be avoided. Plenty of sunshine, an average of about 15 to 20 minutes of facial exposure per day, is enough for the adequate production of vitamin D. Production is directly related to the surface area of skin exposed to the sun and the darkness of the skin (the lighter the skin the more produced). People who live or work in areas where the sun's ultraviolet rays are obscured much of the time should be careful to spend enough time in the sun when it does shine.

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If enough time in the sun is not possible, fish liver oil is the only dietary source of natural vitamin D."

Here are some good non-dairy sources of calcium from *Pocket Guide to Macrobiotics*: "... sesame or other seeds; sea vegetables, especially dulse and hijiki; leafy green vegetables, especially kale and parsley; nuts; and soy products."

What one eats often times determines what one needs to eat. Here's an example, as I understand things. Meat and sugar are both acid forming. Either, or both, in excess means the body needs more alkaline forming elements to balance the excess acidity. Since excess sodium (alkaline forming) is often blamed

for causing high blood pressure, people have reduced their intake of sodium. Thus, the requirement for calcium (also alkaline forming in the body) goes up. Those who eat a lot of meat, especially fatty meats, need to watch their sodium intake as the combination in excess can be fatal. However, a macrobiotic person without a lot of meat consumption can eat sodium without undo worry and thus does not need as much calcium requirement.

Another example concerns us directly with regard to sunshine exposure. Sun blocks are now smeared on most everyone because of the fear of skin cancer. According to Herman Aihara, the dietary cause of skin cancer is too much animal protein consumption. This, along with over-exposure to ultraviolet rays, results in skin cancer. Of course, this is a simplified explanation, the point being that without excess meat consumption, one can get an adequate amount of sunshine exposure without fear of skin cancer and thus does not need "vitamin D" fortified foods.

The part of the quote about whether macrobiotic diets are, or are not, ideal for young children is another matter. I would argue that the typical meat, dairy, and sugar diet is worse than a flexible macrobiotic diet. However, I would agree that an overly restricted macrobiotic diet should not be fed to a young child. They need the building blocks to grow, not a diet designed to remove toxins from the body. Here are some of my recommendations for children.

1. Provide as wide a variety of natural foods as possible, and as one's condition allows. In similar manner, use a wide variety of cooking styles. (This goes for adults too.)
2. Study the principle of macrobiotics constantly to increase your ability to make good judgments. It is one thing to

use yourself as a guinea pig. It is quite another to use your child as one.

3. Learn the various sources of nutrients so that you can be certain your child is getting adequate amounts of each one. (Note: I would use the daily requirements as determined by the World Health Organization rather than those by the USDA as the WHO figures are closer to what a grain-eating person actually needs).
4. Know that children need fat for brain development; good vegetable oils can be used by those wanting to avoid meat completely.
5. Learn to use the proper amount of salt for each person. I have seen those who give way too much to their children and those who give way too little.
6. Trust your child's intuition about how much water they need. Their thirst mechanism is usually 100 percent accurate, especially when eating a diet free from chemical additives and refined sugar.
7. Be open and honest regarding your own health and that of your children. Evaluate your condition daily along with that of your children and make adjustments as needed.
8. Lastly, and above all, make sure your child gets adequate exposure to sunlight, clean air, and pure water. In other words, study and spend more time in Nature.

In closing I would like to comment on a bigger issue. Macrobiotics is about freedom, especially freedom from fear. In today's world we see more and more reports on television and read more and more articles in newspapers that are based on fear – fear of getting this or that sickness, fear of being labeled “abnormal,” fear of not getting the woman or man of our dreams due to some perceived defect, or even the fear of being

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On the one hand, this drives the world economy – television shows get higher ratings, newspapers increase subscriptions, and we buy more products. On the other hand, it is a form of control. We are admonished to discontinue our “faddy diets,” to distrust such natural things as enjoying the sunshine “unprotected” or even breast feeding our infants (too long), and to trust the “experts” more than our own intuition. My hope is that all of us will learn to raise our judging abilities so that we can think more clearly and make the best choices for ourselves and for our children.

I hope this helps those who are worried as a result of reading the “Rickets Returns with Faddy Diets” article, and those interested in furthering their macrobiotic understanding.

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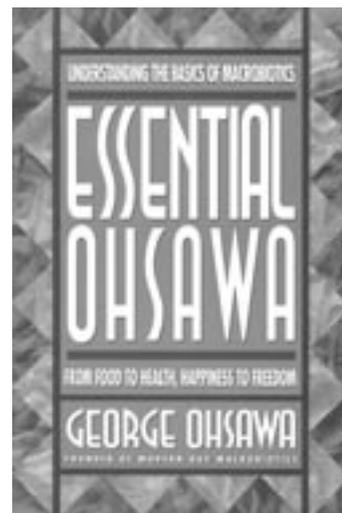
*Carl Ferré is the author of Pocket Guide to Macrobiotics and editor of Macrobiotics Today magazine. Other responses to the rickets question may be found at [www.macrobiotics.co.uk](http://www.macrobiotics.co.uk).*



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