



Thanks to his low-carb diet plan, regular visits and community potlucks, Dr. Jay Wortman helped inspire the 'Namgis community to make health a priority.

# His Big Fat Diet



An Aboriginal community near Vancouver Island is finding that a low-carb mix of traditional and modern foods can work wonders on one's health

BY CORI HOWARD

**On a summer evening in 2006,** in a small room at the 'Namgis Health Centre in Alert Bay, off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island, about 35 men and women—most of them overweight—have gathered to listen to a Métis doctor from Vancouver.

The doors are open to the ocean breeze as Dr. Jay Wortman presents his idea: a strict low-carb diet combined with a modified traditional First Nations diet that would address the growing diabetes epidemic within the community. The 55-year-old Wortman wants to begin a year-long experiment in which volunteers follow his diet,

attend weekly group meetings and get medical checkups on a regular basis.

On a screen at the front of the room, the image of an obese First Nations man appears. He is a familiar figure, a leader from a nearby community. Wortman explains how this man, Jimmy Wilson, tried the diet after hearing Wortman speak at an Aboriginal health conference in Vancouver.

"Jimmy had had diabetes for 17 years," Wortman tells the crowd. "He was morbidly overweight and taking four shots of insulin a day—and even with all that insulin, his blood sugar was way too high. He also had high

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cholesterol and was medicated for high blood pressure." Wortman clicks to the next image—a smiling and much thinner Wilson. "Within two weeks of starting the diet," says Wortman, "he had normal blood sugar and was completely off his insulin. And within 18 weeks, he'd lost 46 pounds."

**Four years earlier, Wortman** himself was slightly overweight and had recently been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. "The Aboriginal tendency towards this disease," he says, "slowly snaked its way up through my family tree to bite me."

Despite knowing the risks that diabetes posed to his health—risks such as kidney failure and heart disease—Wortman put off taking medication until he could come up with a plan. In the meantime, he stopped eating carbohydrates and sugar, contradicting the usual diet recommendations for diabetes. (The Canadian Diabetes Association suggests a diet comprising 45 to 60 percent carbohydrates—especially whole grains, vegetables and fruit—no more than 35 percent fat and 15 to 20 percent protein.) Cutting out carbs and sugars was just a stalling tactic, something Wortman knew would lower his blood sugar, at least temporarily. But with this new diet, he began a life-altering journey of discovery and recovery.

Within the first week, his diabetic symptoms vanished: His blood sugar normalized, he felt more energetic and he started losing weight.

Having worked with the First Na-

tions and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada (where he still works as a senior medical advisor), Wortman was acutely aware of the diabetes epidemic spreading through First Nations communities, where rates of incidence are three to five times higher than those of the general Canadian population. And he knew that if a simple dietary intervention could resolve his own case, then perhaps it could resolve others' cases, as well.

In his duties for Health Canada, he had visited Alert Bay a few times. So when he was looking for somewhere to set his study, that location came to mind: Its 'Namgis First Nation community of close to 800 people was isolated, had its own health centre—and had a diabetes incidence rate of ten percent.

**After Wortman's presentation,** the crowd's reaction was one of curiosity and excitement tinged with mild panic. Some asked what they would eat if they weren't allowed bread, sugar, pasta, potatoes, rice or bannock, so Wortman explained the rules of his plan: The traditional 'Namgis diet includes game, seafood, wild plants and berries; Wortman added market foods with a similar macronutrient composition. So in addition to moose, deer and elk, study participants could eat beef, pork and chicken. And along with the animal and fish fats normally part of their diet, Wortman's diet included cream, butter and cheese. Non-starchy vegetables and modern foods low in starchy sugar were also allowed.

So, as Wortman explained, breakfast at the local hangout, Bill's Café, was still within reach: eggs and bacon, albeit without the hash browns and toast. He then promised regular visits and potlucks for the duration of the study.

That first night, 20 people signed up; by January 2007, 100 had. Among the first was Shelley Cook, a 40-year-old fisher and mother of five boys, ages three to 21. She arrived late, frazzled and dragging her two youngest children with her. She was neither overweight nor did she have diabetes. Wortman wondered why she was there.

But as a single mother, Cook knew she couldn't afford to get sick with diabetes and heart problems, as her father and grandparents had. She'd been thinking about the role diet had played in her family's health problems, but she hadn't connected the dots. "I remember being blown away that night," she says. "I thought, If I can do

this, I'll be okay. My children will be okay."

The idea of returning to a traditional diet appealed to Greg Wadhams, a 53-year-old commercial fisher with diabetes, high blood pressure and a body weight of 294 pounds. With a freezer full of salmon, prawns, clams and locally hunted game, Wadhams found it easier than many to access the kinds of foods allowed on the diet. He joined the study in fall 2006; within a month, he was off his diabetes medication, and his blood pressure had normalized. Within six months, he'd lost 40 pounds.

The local grocery store, ShopRite, got into the swing of things, too, and changed its stock. Manager Kim Mercer says lettuce sales have doubled and egg sales have tripled since the study began. Cauliflower became a bestseller, thanks to one woman's renowned "fried rice" recipe in which cauliflower is substituted for rice. Mercer says the community in general is eating healthier.

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**Try the Diet**  
Find some of the  
low-carb recipes from  
Dr. Wortman's diet,  
at [rd.ca/lowcarb](http://rd.ca/lowcarb).



**Pass 'n Thyme's Wendy Voeller offered a greater assortment of fresh vegetables and low-carb desserts, such as berries with whipped cream.**

WILLIAM WADSEN © NATIVE NORTHWEST, VANCOUVER

**"There's a good rationale for what Jay is trying to do,"** says Dr. Keith Dawson, a partially retired endocrinologist who established one of British Columbia's first diabetes clinics, helped create the Canadian Diabetes Association's prevention and treatment guidelines, and continues to research the condition in Canada's Aboriginal people. "We should have done it a long time ago."

He says there's a debate raging over the effectiveness of the diet advocated by nutritionists who use Canada's Food Guide compared to the effectiveness of diets like Wortman's. "Nutritionists have been arguing for their diet, and we've been teaching it at every diabetes centre in Canada since 1992," he says, "but the number of people who follow those diets is abysmal. We haven't cured anything." Wortman's results, on the other hand, speak for themselves: Many of the study participants were able to stop their insulin regimen, and many lost between 40 and 60 pounds.

**Not everyone was so successful,** though. Even after two months on the diet, Joe Smith, the janitor at Alert Bay Elementary School, weighed around 295 pounds. But he did try: For Wortman's biweekly potlucks, Smith would spend days researching and preparing recipes to add to the dazzling assortment of food on offer. Diagnosed with diabetes eight years before, he helped to set up the first potluck in October 2006. About 40 people attended, all bringing homemade dishes such as fish soup with seaweed, steamed clams, bar-

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becued pork chops and organic greens. Smith's chef's salad with ham, eggs, cheese and his own roasted-garlic dressing was a hit, he says. And Wortman showed people how to make a marinade and salad dressing. "They'd never heard of balsamic vinegar," he says.

For dessert, there was cheesecake without the crust and diet Jell-O with whipped cream.

"We realized then that there's nothing wrong with this diet," says Smith. "It's filling and creative—and that night, everyone walked away full. Not a *tired* full that makes you want to lie down but an *energized* full."

Within a few months, local restaurants got into the spirit. Bill's Café began offering salads as an alternative to fries. At the Pass 'n Thyme Inn, owner Wendy Voeller offered salads at no extra charge and added a greater assortment of fresh vegetables and low-carb desserts, such as berries with whipped cream. About 70 percent of her customers now opt for low-carb food. "Even young kids are coming in and ordering salads," she says.

**It's been more than a year since** the diet experiment ended, and Shelley Cook and her five boys are eating better. She also took part in a ten-day, 400-kilometre canoe trip, her first such journey and the culmination of her efforts to improve her health. She feels clear-headed again—and strong.

"She radiates energy," says Wortman. "She's changed from a stressed mom to this calm, peaceful person."

The changes haven't been as dra-

**For the first potluck, in October 2006, there were homemade dishes such as fish soup with seaweed, steamed clams, and organic greens.**



matic for Smith. He lost about 50 pounds while on the diet, but he's put it back on. Still, he keeps a scale and a calendar in the school's maintenance room, and for each day that he gets out for a walk with Principal Jill Cook, who is also on the diet, he gives himself a sticker. "The diet works, so I'm still on it—but it's *hard* work," he says. "I used food to cover up a lot of guilt and suffering in my life, but I'm getting healthier. I thank God for this diet, for showing me another way."

During a trip to Alert Bay in July 2008, Wortman stopped by the Pass 'n Thyme. When he walked in, the dieters in the room looked down at their plates, hoping there was no evidence of noncompliance. "It gives some of them permission not to follow the diet

when I'm not around," says Wortman. Wadhams wasn't at the Pass 'n Thyme that night, but he did run into the doctor the next morning at Bill's Café. Wortman got up to shake his hand, and asked how he was doing. Wadhams replied that he'd gained about six pounds. "Keep working on it," said Wortman. "Don't give up."

"I won't," vowed Wadhams. He left with just a coffee in his hands—cream, no sugar—and renewed determination.

**But Dr. Dawson wonders how sustainable Dr. Wortman's diet is.** "I haven't been able to understand the best approach for long-term use," he says. "The average person can't follow this diet in the long term. But a variation isn't difficult and also works. Whether First Nations people can stick to an even slightly modified version, no one knows."

He *does* know Wortman's approach has been an eye-opener, both for Alert Bay and the worldwide medical community studying diabetes. "A lot of people still don't accept his diet," says Dawson. "They're not ready to adapt to new ideas. But his diet works, and we should be doing what he's done—in all First Nations communities."

**There are lots of people who mistake their imagination for their memory.**

*Josh Billings*