

La Dolce Vita

When Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the Arctic explorer, was in his seventies, he switched to an Eskimo diet—two pounds of lean red meat and a half-pound of suet every day. He wrote in 1958, "I found my enjoyment of fat was unaltered. I achieved an improvement in health, and I effortlessly took off ten pounds my doctor asked me to remove. My supposedly age-stiffened joints grew as limber as they were ten years ago and I am now past 77. My wife thinks the chief improvement is in my disposition."

The Inuit or Eskimos who have adopted the white man's diet have fared less well. Otto Schaefer, MD, head of the Arctic Medical Research Unit in Edmonton, wrote in 1971 that the women "chew candy instead of animal skins, and what used to be an invaluable source of minerals in their diets, the chewing of raw meat and bones, has become impossible due to rapidly rotting teeth: Instead of their diet being protein, at least half of the calories today are from carbo-



hydrates, factory processed foods, bought at a store. Eskimos are becoming the victims of civilization diseases such as obesity, gall bladder disease and acne vulgaris. Eskimo teenagers with acne . . . are a sad new phenomenon."

Perhaps the most striking change in the health patterns of the Inuit has been the rise in diabetes. Thirty years ago some authorities thought that the Inuit were immune to diabetes. In 1956 Thora McIlroy Mills began a systematic survey and located three adult diabetics in the Nome area and five in Greenland. All had been living for years in areas where white man's food was plentiful. In time Ms. Mills found two cases, one at Coppermine and another at Bathurst Inlet, where the victims, both women, had not been living on European foods. Since then, as the prevalence of candy, soft drinks and other sweetened foods has been extended, the number of cases in the western Arctic has doubled, and the number in Greenland and Alaska has trebled.

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