

The Primal Blueprint

Guest: Mark Sisson

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Mark Sisson is a former distance runner, triathlete, and Ironman contender, as well as the author of numerous books, including *The Primal Blueprint* and *The Primal Connection*.

WOODS: Naturally, we have to begin with the required question: what is the Primal Blueprint?

SISSON: The Primal Blueprint is a strategy for achieving a lean, strong, fit, healthy body with the least amount of pain, suffering, sacrifice, and discipline possible. How we do that is by calling on modern genetic science and evolutionary biology to give our genes what our genes expect. The premise is that we've evolved to be these lean, upright, fit human beings over millions of years of evolution and that our genes were forged in this crucible of starvation, hard times, and tough times, and they expect certain inputs. When we don't give our body these inputs those genes take steps to protect us. They might make us fat, because they're storing food. They might make us inflamed. They assume that we're under some assault because of the bad foods we're eating. *The Primal Blueprint* looks at all these hidden genetic switches that we can access to be as healthy as possible.

WOODS: Before we say something about your new book *The Primal Connection*, the thing that drew me into your circles was the personal testimonies from people at MarksDailyApple.com and all around the Internet. Lew Rockwell has featured a lot of them, and also I've seen them with my own two eyes. The thing is that you don't have to stretch and tell us a story about a guy who was a thousand pounds and barely clinging to life, and now he's 150 and doing great. You've got so many regular-guy testimonies. Can you share with listeners the typical kind of testimony that you publish weekly on your site?

SISSON: The typical testimony is somebody who was frustrated after years of trying the conventional wisdom of losing weight, or achieving better health. So many people come to the Primal Blueprint not just because they're overweight. They have type 2 diabetes, or are women who have polycystic ovarian syndrome. They've got thyroid issues or all manner of different lifestyle problems that are afflicting people these days. So the standard testimonial is, "Dude, I lost 50 pounds or 70 pounds in the last eight months. I'm off my meds. I've never had more energy, but the single greatest thing about this program is I know I can do this for the rest of my life."

WOODS: mentioned in the intro the books you've written and your most recent book. Tell us, what is *The Primal Connection* about?

SISSON: *The Primal Blueprint*, the initial book, really focused on diet and exercise as the prime modalities for achieving this health. *The Primal Connection* looks at what amounts to all the other things that our hunter-gatherer genes expect of us. How do we orchestrate our sleep, so we get enough that we don't get negatively impacted by stress? How much sun do we really need, and how important is sun exposure? How do you achieve that? We look at things like going out in nature, because our brains are wired to expect the frequencies found in nature and not the coffin found in an urban setting. If you live in an urban setting, there are ways that you can achieve those sorts of resonance. You just have to figure out how to get that, and we talk about that in *The Primal Connection*. Our genes expect us to play in the dirt. Our immune systems are supposed to be learning from exposure to soil organisms and organisms in the food. When we live in this overly clean, pristine, hygienic environment, we don't give our immune systems an opportunity to learn how to protect us from the real serious stuff. So all of the sorts of other aspects of life are embodied in *The Primal Connection*.

WOODS: So it sounds to me like books that one would want to read in tandem, that reinforce each other

according to different aspects.

SISSON: Absolutely. *The Primal Blueprint* would be the first one, how to dial in your diet and your exercise, and then *The Primal Connection*, how to bring in all those other elements of your life with the intention of being not just healthy but happy.

WOODS: Can you explain what the difference might be between what we would call good fats and bad fats? We've internalized this idea that fat makes you fat. It's the word "fat," and we see low fat all around us. The First Lady is imposing these low-fat, high-carb meals on the school lunches. The kids are all starving midway through the day, because they haven't had any fat. Can you sort that out, so the average person doesn't feel like if he eats too many olives he's going to be a monster?

SISSON: It's a fairly complex equation, because what we're trying to do with *The Primal Blueprint* diet is modulate insulin response. Carbohydrates tend to raise insulin. Insulin is a fat storage hormone, so the more insulin you have the more you store excess calories as fat, whether it's dietary fat or carbohydrate or protein. So one of the things that we've assumed over the years, or at least conventional wisdom has assumed, is that fat makes you fat. Well, in fact, carbohydrates are really what make you fat in excess. The main notion we try to arrive at with *The Primal Blueprint* is there are certain types of fats that are actually important that you get them. Saturated fat is not the enemy. There are certain amounts of saturated fat that are actually encouraged within *The Primal Blueprint* diet.

But there are fats that I think everyone would recognize are bad for you. Trans fats are definitely bad for everybody. There are certain forms of polyunsaturated fats, the omega-6 variety, that would be found, say, in vegetable and corn oils, soybean oil, things like that, that are pro-inflammatory, and we would be well advised to get rid of those. Having said that, if you do understand that fat in and of itself isn't what makes you fat, particularly if you get the healthy fats—that includes, by the way, meat, fish, fowl, eggs, nuts, and seeds, that if you get the appropriate amounts of fats, they actually not only don't make you fat but they probably help your body become better at burning off your own stored body fat, which is really what we all want.

WOODS: Mark, a lot times when I talk to Primal people, a lot of jokes revolve around bacon. People love to celebrate that within reason they can have all the bacon they want. Unpack why we would normally feel funny about having bacon and eggs. We're taught that's the worst breakfast you can have. You should be having a bran muffin or something. Why is that exactly the opposite of the truth?

SISSON: It became a little bit of a cliché, this whole bacon thing, because exactly what you just said. That the conventional wisdom of the past several decades would be that bacon is probably the worst food you can eat. What we've decided, or what we've uncovered with *The Primal Blueprint* and with this whole paleo style of eating, is that bacon is not only not that bad; in small amounts it's good for you. It's appropriate to have it, and it satisfies a craving or an urge that a lot of people have. Some people, I think, have gone overboard. I've seen bacon brownies and bacon bread and bacon spreads. I think a little bit of bacon is a good thing. Probably too much—I don't want to get sick of bacon. It's become kind of a cliché that people glom onto, because a lot of what we do within *The Primal Blueprint* and this whole paleo eating world—by the way, not unlike a typical libertarian experience—is to thumb your nose at the establishment and say, "Look, I discovered that you've been giving me the wrong information for the past 30 years. Here's what I'm going to do."

WOODS: Let's talk about that for a minute. There are two things you mentioned, both of which I want to delve into. Let's say a little bit more about this matter of the food pyramid. Kids memorize this thing in school. They reproduce it. They color it in. They've got the grains at the bottom. You have to have 11 servings a day or whatever the recommended amount is, and you're suggesting that the pyramid—if we even should think of food in that way—should be ordered in a completely different way. What would *The*

Primal Blueprint food pyramid look like?

SISSON: We have one, and what it looks like is there are meat, fish, fowl, and eggs at the base of the pyramid. We eliminate entirely the whole grain tier, because we're quite convinced within this scientific community that I play around in with paleo and ancestral health, that grains are antithetical to human health. Not only should they not be recommended, but they should probably be avoided to the extent possible. So meat, fish, fowl, eggs, nuts, seeds on the bottom; vegetables—and we encourage copious amounts of vegetables—then minor amounts of oils and herbs and spices and things like that. So there's a reordering of the pyramid, if you will, even though I really don't like the term "pyramid." It sort of has some negative connotations across the board, in terms of dictating what people should eat.

I think what we're trying to do is just educate people on choices and say, "Look, I don't care what you choose to eat. I just want you to be aware of the ramifications of your choice. If you choose to eat grains even after I suggested you don't, we can still be friends. It's just that I want you to understand what happens to your body if you overdo the grain thing or if you overdo the sugar thing or if you overdo the omega-6 fats." This is my opportunity to educate the public about the choices they're making.

WOODS: Is there anything to this idea I hear sometimes that grains in the past 50 or 100 years are somehow different from grains in the past? They've gotten worse in some way because of some type of engineering? Forgive my ignorance, but I hear this a lot. Does this ring any bells with you? What does this mean?

SISSON: The farm industry is always trying to improve yield, and one of the things that the vegetarian movement and the macrobiotic movement years ago always stress was that you can get all your protein from non-animal sources. So the grain industry said, "Well, look, gluten is the storage form of protein in grains. Why don't we increase the gluten content in all of the grains? That way we can advertise that grains have more protein than they did, say, 50 or 60 years ago." So there's been this movement to increase the amount of gluten in grains. But the reality is that gluten isn't good for human consumption. We've all heard of gluten intolerance, and we know people who maybe have tested positive for celiac disease or who have serious gastrointestinal problems as a result of eating gluten. But I would suggest that almost everybody has some level of negative response to taking in gluten or these grain proteins. So yes, in the past 50 years, as we've increased the amount of gluten in grains, we've just made a bad situation worse.

WOODS: I realize it's hopeless to look to the White House or any of these places for dietary advice, but how about private nutritionists? Have you seen any evolution in their thinking more in line with what you're saying? Or are they all still talking in terms of buying some Weight Watchers frozen dinners, and you'll be fine?

SISSON: Oh no, I'm seeing a huge movement in the nutrition counseling field where people are understanding the concept of epigenetics, how your food and your exercise movements affect how your genes express themselves in rebuilding you on a minute-by-minute basis and the impact that food has on that, and how again the conventional wisdom has been so wrong in so many areas. So, oddly enough, what I see are young people who have come to the *Primal Blueprint* or to some paleo way of eating and saying, "Look, I really love this. I want to teach this." Then they find out the major way that they can make this a life career is by going back and getting an RD, become a Registered Dietician. They have to take a series of courses that teaches them the old way of thinking, so they can get a certificate to hang on their wall and then start teaching the new way. It's really quite perverse if you ask me, but that's the choice that these young people are making in going into this field. They have to suck it up and learn the old dogmatic way of thinking and then be able to apply this new, exciting way. Literally it's such an empowering feeling to be able to understand that you can affect your health and your happiness on a daily basis based simply on food choices.

WOODS: Mark, maybe as long as they're stuck learning the old way, the silver lining will be that when they get out there in the public eye, they're going to know both sides inside and out. Whereas the older folks—I don't mean chronologically old—they're going to know their dogma, their propaganda, and it's good for, if I may say, our side of things, to have this complete knowledge of "here's what people used to think. Here's what we think now." And then they can go out there and be even more effective in spreading this stuff.

Now it's easy to pick on the First Lady, because of the school lunch issue. I mean, school lunches were bad enough to start with. Most of the time we send our kids with their own lunches. But most of the government's involvement here looks like just informal advice coming from government officials. Is there anything that any government agency like the FDA is doing by commission or omission that is intensifying the disinformation?

SISSON: I don't think so. I just think that there's a huge impasse that you encounter every step of the way when you try to change public policy. It's the nature of the beast. It's become so cumbersome and so impossible to effect change that this is sort of the exciting thing about what we do—the fact that this is a grassroots movement. The real inroads are going to be made not just in me telling you what I did to lose 50 pounds but in corporations who are willing to take on pilot studies and say, "Okay, we've got 2,000 employees that have metabolic syndrome or type 2 diabetes or have issues, lower back pain or whatever. We're going to do a pilot study where we're going to throw a little bit of money at this and encourage them all to take on this Primal Blueprint lifestyle, and at the end of six months or a year, I can show you how you've saved two or three million dollars in bottom line costs." Again, it's just about the economics of this thing. That's where the real strength of this movement is going to come. It's going to come from private industry, and the market forces demonstrating the positive bottom-line benefits. It's not going to come down from top-down public policy.

WOODS: I want to distinguish a little bit between what you call the Primal Blueprint and the paleo people. Obviously, there's a lot of friendly overlap here. I have a paleo cookbook at home, and I think you wrote the foreword to it. So we're all friends here to some degree, but with the Primal Blueprint, being your brand, I am interested in distinguishing the two. I know it's more than just dairy, but can you explain the differences? Then I want to ask you about dairy. Are you saying that dairy is something that we can tolerate, so therefore let's not take it away and be killjoys, or is it a positive good?

SISSON: The first part of your question, the difference between the two: paleo really started out as a diet and a way of looking at, again, orchestrating a daily diet to emulate a hunter-gatherer experience in the context of the twenty-first century. How do I eat like a hunter-gatherer would have eaten today? And that became the main sphere of paleo. The Primal Blueprint has always been about the full lifestyle. It's been about not just the diet, but the exercise patterns. It's been about the sleep, the sun exposure, the amount of play you get, how much you use your brain. It's been more of a complete lifestyle rather than paleo just being a dietary thing.

If you compare just the dietary aspects of the Primal Blueprint versus the paleo diet, initially you saw that paleo was still avoiding saturated fats. Now they've come on board and said, "You know what? Saturated fats—you're right, they're not the bad guy." There's no correlation between saturated fat and heart disease, and provided you get other sources of macronutrients, saturated fats are probably a good thing. It seems that the paleo diet still sort of doesn't accept dairy as an appropriate food for humans. On the other hand, when I designed the Primal Blueprint, I wanted it to be as inclusive as possible. I wanted as many people to come on board and say, "I'm going to try this for 30 days, and if I get the results I'm expecting, I'll love it. I'll keep doing it. It'll be great."

With regard to dairy there are some people who are lactose intolerant for sure. But for those people who are not lactose intolerant and who consider some form of cheese or cream in their coffee or butter, which is basically 100 percent fat—those are all very acceptable. Again, all these foods fall on the spectrum, Tom, so

they go from best choices to worst choices. I would never tell anybody even if they liked milk or were lactose tolerant to go into a store and buy homogenized, pasteurized two-percent milk. I think that stuff is an abomination. But raw milk for some people is appropriate. Artisanal cheeses for some people are appropriate. So that's a difference between the paleo and the Primal. We talk about a little bit of red wine being okay within moderation on the Primal Blueprint. I think the paleo people have started to adopt that as appropriate as well.

We make a big deal of chocolate. Even though the caveman didn't have chocolate, there's enough good science behind the polyphenols and some of the antioxidants in chocolate to suggest that for a treat, as opposed to living some monastic sacrificial lifestyle and giving up everything—that chocolate would be 80 percent, 90 percent chocolate—would be an appropriate treat for a lot of people to have to give them the kind of experience on this Primal Blueprint eating strategy where they can say, "This is easy to do. All I had to do was give up grains. I had to give up some of the nasty vegetable oils, but for the most part I'm eating meat, fish, fowl, eggs, nuts, seeds, a little bit of wine if I like wine, a little bit of chocolate, some cheese once in a while." It's a very inclusive eating strategy.

WOODS: You hit on the raw milk issue, which I was going to ask you about anyway. So your view is that it's certainly preferable to the homogenized Hood brand two-percent milk that you see, that is served basically everywhere, by the way. In hotels, whenever they have a free breakfast, you can never get whole milk anymore. When I got to college I was taught to avoid whole milk. You've got to have as skim as possible, and the monstrosities that I consumed when I look back on are just appalling.

I want to ask you what you think about the sweetener Stevia. Is that okay?

SISSON: Stevia is an example of a naturally occurring herb that can be processed to a certain extent and become a form of sweetening that people can add to certain things. The caution that I would offer, though, is that one of the things that we're trying to do within the Primal Blueprint is decrease our cravings for sweet things in the first place. Again, the brain is wired over millions of years of evolution to crave sweet things, because historically, up until probably about 300 years ago, there were no sweet things available in large quantities. Until the sugar industry came on the scene, the ability to find sweet things was so rare that when you did—either a stash of bee honey or some overripe fruit—you tended to gorge on it, because that was the brain telling you this is a unique, safe treat, and a source of energy and fuel that we can take on right now.

Obviously, today we have sweet things at every turn, every street corner; everywhere you go there's an overabundance of sweet things. That's, I think, one of the reasons that so many of us are overweight, because our brains are telling us, "Eat sweets, eat sweets, eat sweets." So the first thing we do within the Primal Blueprint is we say, okay, we're going to cut down the sugar for sure. Then we're going to cut back on the processed carbohydrates that you would find. Again, the flour, the wheat flour, the grain flours and things like that, because those convert to glucose in the bloodstream readily as well—that glucose in the bloodstream is sugar. Ultimately we're looking to decrease our cravings for these sweet things, and we kind of sabotage that intent a little bit when we continue to sweeten things even using artificial sweeteners. So while Stevia is healthy and fine and wonderful, I caution the overuse of it, because it is so sweet that it continues to promote craving for sweet things that we want to get rid of.

WOODS: That's a very, very interesting answer. I still struggle with the craving for sweets, and I've fallen a little off the wagon. I've gotten more lax recently, because with our house, we've got a fifth child on the way. It's very labor intensive around the house. So it's easy to slip and slide here and there, but because I make so many YouTube videos, and there are so many pictures of me around Facebook, it's funny. People can observe. It's like Oprah on a small scale. They can observe the evolution of my body. They meet in person and say, "My gosh, you're a rail." So I have to, on the other hand, be careful that I don't balloon out again, because people will say, "Oh my gosh, he's gone back to his old ways." I have actually used Stevia

recently, so that is actually a good cautionary note.

Let me ask you: is there anything that you've come across in research or studies or news items or anything that has given you pause or has made you reconsider any aspect of the Primal Blueprint?

SISSON: Very good question. Short answer is no. But I reserve the right to change my mind or to reconsider some of these things as information does come down the pike, if you will. I've said for the longest time that my philosophy is that the less sugar you burn in a lifetime, the better off you are. So the more you can decrease your dependence on carbohydrates, and the more you can become what we all are—fat-burning beasts—you can develop this skill to access stored body fat and use that for fuel, so your body achieves what's called its "ideal body composition."

Having said that, there's been some discussion in the past several years that some people go so off in the other direction of very low carb that they have issues that may manifest over long periods of time. Maybe those are people who need to increase the amount of carbohydrates they take in. We look at that. Okay, show me some research. Let's investigate that. Let's not be so dogmatic, if you will, in our recommendations about cutting back on sugars or carbohydrates. So yeah, I'm always listening to my audience. We have over two million unique visitors a month at MarksDailyApple.com, and these people are very vocal. They're very voracious consumers of the information, and they'll let me know if they think something's off. It's been a great experience to have this blog and to have people comment and say, "Would you consider something else or another point of view or would you rethink that?" It's been, again, like my own personal wiki here. It's been a very useful tool to hone my message.

WOODS: Mark, I want to give you a chance as we wrap up here to plug MarksDailyApple.com, because a lot of the ideas that you talk about, as with any of us—if I absolutely had to I could distill a lot of my message into ten bullet points—but yet, I'm able to blog frequently and elaborate on things and find news items so that even though it is just a certain number of points, there's an endless amount of things to talk about. How is it that you're able to keep things fresh and interesting, so people keep coming back over and over again to MarksDailyApple.com?

SISSON: Because every time we open one door all of a sudden there are four more doors at the end of the hall. Every time we pose some unique point of view about a way of eating or a lifestyle or about a movement pattern, there are so many different people who can comment on that and who can raise questions. At my company we just keep amassing a list of more and more questions. Here was a real specific thing. If omega-3 fats are supposed to be good for you, and this guy over here is saying maybe an excess of omega-3 fats isn't good for you, there's four articles that we could write just on that.

So it's become this challenge to distill the information that's most reader-friendly and usable—and yet if you go to my site, we've got 3,000 articles that I've written over the past seven years. It's quite a huge amount of information to crawl through, but you'll see that that's why the books, and we do events and things like that, to distill this information into what you call the "bullet points," but the nuances are always so interesting and incredible. Ultimately, the bottom line: while I say everybody's metabolism, the biology all works the same way, the degree to which it works from one person to another is very individualized, and that's where the interesting areas of self-experimentation come in. That's where we have fun playing with the margin and suggesting, "Okay, maybe try this, or maybe do this a little bit differently."

WOODS: Mark, I'm going to let you run. Of course we all want overall health. I think a lot of people who gravitate to you are initially looking just to lose weight, and then as they do that they realize, well, there are so many more benefits that come from this than just losing weight. I think I can say, even though it does sound like a cliché, that if you're sick and tired of being sick and tired, and if you're also sick and tired of trying things that just don't work, I can tell you that I myself and many people I know who have listened to Mark have had tremendous success. The interview you and I did on the Peter Schiff Show—we did two of

them, but one of them a couple of years ago especially—I get more comments on that, to this day, of people saying that that one interview changed their whole lives around, than all other interviews I've done put together. At the very least you owe it to yourself to check out [MarksDailyApple.com](https://www.marksdailyapple.com), and even better to read *The Primal Blueprint* and *The Primal Connection*, not to mention the cookbooks and stuff that I mentioned at the outset.