

## Nutritional Etymology

For those who like the play of words, medical etymology offers a brief respite from the stresses and alarm reactions of every day.

Nutritional terms have interesting derivations, often symbolizing the connection of nutrients and life.

NUTRITION comes from the Latin word *nutrire*, to suckle or feed—the primary act of suckling so characteristic of the process of nutrition.

METABOLISM is derived from the Greek *metabole*, a change. Not only is metabolism a changing process, but the end-product is a METABOLITE.<sup>1</sup>

The derivations of some words are classical in their simplicity. Thus, CARBOHYDRATE comes from *carbo*, Latin for coal, i.e. carbon, and the Greek *hydor*, water. (Greek and Latin hybridization occurs frequently in medicine [e.g. glomerulonephritis, autoclave, dextrocardia, etc.] and, although anathema to the purists, such terms are here to stay—an indication of the perverse imperfection of man.)

PROTEIN is logically a derivative of the Greek word for “primary,” *proteios*; while LIPID is clearly from *lipos*, the word for fat in Greek.

Our term DIET is a modification of the Greek *diaita*, a way of living or regimen. As the word spread in the days of the Romans and French its meaning became restricted. Curiously we say “dietary regimen.”

The vitamins are named with a certain degree of logic. The structure of THIAMINE is responsible for its name. *Theion* is the Greek word for sulfur; the AMINE is a term selected a century ago for “substances derived from ammonia.”<sup>1</sup>

RIBOFLAVIN has the RIBO from a coined word (ribonic acid), and FLAVIN from *flavus*, Latin for yellow.

Since scurvy is *scorbutus* in Latin, ASCORBIC ACID was created by adding the Greek *a* for “not.”

RICKETS has an uncertain origin. The word for an inflammation of the spine, *rachitis* (Greek *rachis*, spine) was applied originally to hump-back, but now is used for the vitamin D deficiency state. There is also an Old English term, *rick*, which means twist; either way the twisted spine was clearly in the minds of the word-coiners.

*Obdere* means to “eat up” in Latin; from this comes *obesus*, fat, and our all-too-common word OBESITY.

PELLAGRA could have two derivations: from Italian, where *pelle* means skin, and *agra* rough; or from Latin *pellis*, skin, and *agra*, Germanic for seizure or disease.

That honorable element IRON has its variations. In Old English *iren* meant iron, and the change in spelling dates only from 300 years ago. The Greek term, *sideros*, appears in SIDEROSIS, while the Latin term, *ferrum*, appears as FERROUS and its variations.

So much for looking backward. It is to be hoped that medical terms yet unborn will fulfill the requirements of accuracy, clarity, and

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### REFERENCE

1. Pepper, O. H. P.: *Medical Etymology*. W. B. Saunders, Philadelphia, 1949.