

Protein-Rich Diet Helps Gorillas Keep Lean

Gorillas don't seem to be facing the obesity epidemic that humans in modern society are.

That's because our primate brethren follow a lean diet with protein concentrations similar to the American Heart Association's recommendations for humans, says Jessica Rothman, an anthropologist at Hunter College of the City University of New York.

Dr. Rothman and her colleagues studied mountain gorillas in Uganda and found that they eat a protein-rich diet, supplemented with fruits. Protein makes up about 17 percent of their total energy intake, close to the 15 percent protein intake the heart association recommends for people.

The study appears in the current issue of the journal *Biology Letters*.

During certain times of the year, when fruits are not available, protein-rich leaves dominate the gorilla's diet, the report found. About 31 percent of the total energy intake is protein during these times. This is similar to the protein content in high-protein weight-loss regimens like the Atkins diet.

"What they are doing during these times is overeating protein in order to meet their energy requirements," Dr. Rothman said.

Understanding the gorilla diet can help researchers better understand the evolution of the human diet, said her co-author David Raubenheimer a nutritional ecologist at Massey University in New Zealand.

Foods rich in sugars, starches and fats, once scarcely available to humans, are now abundant.

Modern societies "are diluting the concentration of protein in the modern diet," Dr. Raubenheimer said. "But we eat to get the same amount of proteins we needed before, and in so doing, we're overeating."

The research could also help in preserving and creating ideal habitats for mountain gorillas, which are endangered. Only about 800 are in existence today.

Dr. Rothman is in Uganda running similar nutritional studies on other primates, including red-tailed monkeys and baboons.