

Photograph by David Spero

THE FOOD DUDE



No carbs after 6pm? Wheat intolerance? Pah, says the celebrity nutritionist Ian Marber. He tells **Kate Salter** why his dietary advice is easier to swallow than the diktats of some others he could mention...

There are few people who could make the inner workings of the gut exciting, but the nutritionist Ian Marber is one of them. As he waxes lyrical on slow-release wholegrains while drawing diagrams of things called mitochondria, his enthusiasm is so infectious you forget he is talking about things that would normally bore most of us silly.

For the past 10 years Marber has managed to get people to pay attention

to the kind of nutritional advice that until recently was doled out by hippies in health-food shops. He is the man behind the Food Doctor, a nutrition consultancy based in west London and an immensely popular range of health foods. Often referred to as 'the celebrity nutritionist Ian Marber' – a title he says he dislikes, even though it's not far from the truth – Marber makes regular appearances on television, writes advice columns for

newspapers and magazines and has written a bestselling series of diet books. But as well as tending to the dodgy digestive systems of celebrities (about whom he is frustratingly discreet), the media appearances and the health-food range, Marber is a dedicated nutritionist on a mission to get us to listen to the kind of sensible advice that flies in the face of the diet-obsessed, wheat-intolerant, no-carbs-after-6pm brigade.



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A tanned, fit-looking 45, dressed in slim-fitting black trousers and a black V-neck jumper, Marber looks more like a posh property developer than someone who deals with the often deeply unglamorous world of bodily functions. Marber specialises in digestive conditions, from bloating and food intolerances to more serious complaints such as coeliac disease. A large part of what he does is also geared towards weight loss. But one of the reasons Marber has become so popular is that he gives simple advice – always eat breakfast, don't deny yourself the odd pudding – that is easily followed, rather than spouting diktats that advise eating gooseberries on the third Tuesday of every month.

Marber's no-nonsense approach is born of his belief that people have become disillusioned with nutritional advice because there is now too much choice, and too many promises of miracle solutions. 'I think in this world of billions a lot of people are looking to make themselves feel special, and sometimes good honest advice is not what they want. They want the magic, they want the Hogwarts, the slightly strange consultant in a flowing caftan saying, "Ahhh, I can tell..." What they don't want to hear is, "You don't have a food intolerance. You don't have a food allergy. What you've actually got is a yeast infection or an excess of bacteria." That's not sexy. It's much sexier to believe, "That woman was brilliant and told me I can't eat peas. Now my life is changed..."

As his clinic is based in chi-chi Holland Park, Marber has his fair share of clients who, with a healthy bank balance to sustain them, can be more in thrall than most to the myriad 'breakthrough' solutions on offer. 'Considering where we are in west London, you would think we'd get all the rich housewives,' Marber says when we meet at his office. 'Well, we absolutely do. And we also get the estate agent from Glasgow who saved up for four months. Funnily enough, people who are very rich often see too many people. They wouldn't go to three or four

colourists for their hair, but they will see four or five people about their bowel, or their bloating. They do four different things at once and never get it sorted.'

Presumably, Marber is just as tough with his famous clients, who are more susceptible than most to the latest wacky diet regime. 'There's one "celebrity" nutrition consultant who famously reads faces,' he says. 'I don't understand that. If I offered to read your palm in order to tell you what you could eat, you wouldn't trust me for a nanosecond. Certainly, one uses visual clues, but you

don't make a food plan based on a few clues.'

A typical visit to the Food Doctor clinic involves three consultations. 'The first consultation is where we gather the information – blood test, urine tests. Often clients bring test results or a history from

their GP. Then I write a food programme for them. Then they come back to see how it's gone. We're not primary-health providers; we're secondary, if not tertiary, so if somebody came here and hadn't been to their GP first we'd always refer them back to their GP without fail.

'I know this sounds really worthy,' he continues, 'but I'm very much about education. I show people using basic visual tools: "This is what happens in your body, and this is what you're doing, which changes that, so if you did this instead *that* would happen..."

Marber's passion for educating people about good nutrition comes from his own experience as a sufferer of coeliac disease, a severe allergy to any form of gluten. As a baby he was sent to Great Ormond Street children's hospital with a 'huge head and wasting body', as the doctors described it. He spent years suffering from stomach pain, headaches and fatigue, but wasn't diagnosed until he was 29. 'I happened to be reading an article in the hairdresser's about coeliac disease and recognised all my

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10 TIPS FOR A HEALTHY DIET BY IAN MARBER

1 GET YOUR CALCIUM Enhance calcium levels by eating things that help its action or absorption, such as **inulin** (in asparagus, garlic and Jerusalem artichokes) or essential fats (omegas 3 and 6)

2 LOVE PROBIOTICS Taking a high-quality capsule ensures a decent amount of **good bacteria** survive digestion. They help reduce cholesterol, raise B-vitamin levels and improve immune function

3 KEEP A BALANCE Taking individual supplements may create high levels of one nutrient to the detriment of another. Take a **mineral complex** rather than individual minerals

4 AVOID 'SUPER' FOODS They are a product of super-marketing. You would do just as well, if not better, to eat **four apples** as have a handful of exotic and expensive berries

5 TAKE THE RIGHT SUPPLEMENTS

Rather than self-medicate, consult a **nutritional therapist** to see what you need

6 ALLERGIES ARE RARE Some people would have you believe that nearly all of us are intolerant of or allergic to some food or another. **This isn't the case.** Always consult a doctor before cutting out food groups

7 DON'T CRASH DIET Dieting too quickly alerts the body to **potential famine**. If you need to lose weight, do so slowly and with an understanding of how long it should take

8 GET THE RIGHT EDUCATION Learn about **nutrition, not dieting**. Eating well has countless benefits, yet many see food as something that

makes them either fat or thin **9 BE PREPARED** Ensure you have cans of beans and legumes in the larder. They can be added to soups or salads to supply **protein and fibre** to even the most rushed meal

10 MIND YOUR LANGUAGE Don't speak ill of overweight people in front of children. We blame the media for images of super-thin celebrities but our own **attitudes to fat** are just as bad



symptoms. I rang the nutritionist mentioned in the article and went to see her that day.' Marber stopped eating gluten and says that six months later his life was transformed. He eventually left his job at an investment company, studied nutrition and began practising in 1998.

Since then, Marber says, people's attitudes to food and nutrition have changed hugely, although he admits that 'weight is still the driving force behind many people's decision to change their food'. Nowadays, food and diet are a constant source of fascination, and while it may be a good thing that people pay more attention to what they eat, Marber says that the wealth of information available can lead people to self-diagnose, often incorrectly. An example of this is the now popular belief that bread makes you fat, causing more and more people, women in particular, to self-diagnose a 'wheat intolerance', something Marber has little patience with.

'When people come to see me and say they have a "wheat intolerance", the chances are that 99 times out of 100 they don't. What they do have is bloating and some discomfort following too many carbohydrates, or from the yeast in the bread.' Another current obsession cited by Marber is bloating. 'Now even "bloating" has become medicalised,' he says. 'People didn't complain of bloating 10 years ago. I ask people who complain of bloating, "Where do you want your food to go? In your shoes?" What they see as bloating is just the body digesting food. Most people are just eating the wrong combination of protein and carbohydrates, or perhaps they need to do an anti-thrush diet. It's very rarely just a simple "It's aubergines" or "It's wheat". I wish it *were* that simple. Because then we'd be doing this interview by satellite link, or I'd have flown you out on the Food Doctor private jet to my island in Malaysia.'

With our endless appetite for new 'wonder' ingredients and the diets that promote them, it seems we are willing to listen to anyone who can tell us how to eat better. Marber thinks this encourages

some 'experts' to give misplaced advice. 'I think what happens is that a lot of inexperienced consultants whose hearts are in the right places, who want to do good, insert themselves through unbridled enthusiasm into situations where they're not qualified. I gave a talk recently and there was someone in the audience who was studying at a college I'd never heard of, and she said, "I just want to know, when I'm with patients..." I asked her, "Are you a doctor? No? Well, then they're clients, not patients,

When people come to see me and say they have a "wheat intolerance" the chances are that 99 times out of 100 they don't'

and you're not 'treating' them." This kind of thing rightly annoys lots of doctors.' While we're on the subject of dubious 'doctors', doesn't Marber fall into the same category, calling himself the Food Doctor? 'I'm not a doctor and I've never claimed to be. The brand is the Food Doctor. That's like saying Anita Roddick was the Body Shop. I don't set myself up as a doctor, and if you look at recent press I'm much tighter than I ever was, so it always says "Ian Marber, from the Food Doctor".'

The conversation inevitably segues on to the controversial subject of Gillian McKeith, or, as Marber puts it, 'the G word'. 'I think the programme *You Are What You Eat* meant she went from being an "expert" to a celebrity, and that muddied the waters. I've done a show like that, but I've never shamed people, never ever made them cry.'

But Marber does have some sympathy for McKeith. 'With poor Gillian it became very personal. People would say, "But why would you want to look like that?" Why does it matter what she looks like? Had she been tall and pretty without a curved spine due to a birth defect,

would people have wanted to look like her, so would her advice have been more palatable? I don't know.'

Part of Marber's success with clients seems to be his reluctance to resort to McKeith-style scare tactics. 'You've got to find a balance between mollycoddling them and sitting in the corner wagging your finger. It's very much about finding a practical solution that works for the individual. If someone says, "I'm sorry, but I must eat Mars Bars," you're going to have to be a bit tough about that, but what you can't say is, "Do this or you're wrong." Because otherwise all you've done is create another dependent, reliant, sad, miserable being, and I think it's immoral, to be honest.

'It's not just about how your body

functions; it's how your mind functions,' Marber continues. 'I always tell my clients, "When you're following a food plan, don't tell anyone because what will happen is that everyone will say, "Ooh, what are you doing? I did that, it didn't work." One of the problems of the diet industry is [the belief that] if a diet works it's because it's good. If it fails it's because the individual is bad. So the individual is

always left with either a sense of success that they owe to someone else or a sense of failure that's their fault.'

So does he practise what he preaches? I ask him to list his average daily consumption: live yogurt, seeds, grilled chicken salad, vegetable soup... It all sounds terribly virtuous. But Marber insists this isn't the case. 'I don't have goji berries flown in from Brazil or anything. I don't hold back – if I'm out for dinner I'll have a starter and a main course, and I'll share a pudding if it's the right pudding or if I want some. Last week I was at a restaurant and someone next to me was eating a custard tart. So I ordered one and took one spoonful out of the middle, and the girl I was having dinner with had the bit around the outside. Who knew I could be made happy by a custard tart?' ●

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'GILLIAN BECAME A CELEBRITY AND THAT MUDDIED THE WATERS'