



## THE MCDUGALL NEWSLETTER | *It's the food.*



### Nathan Pritikin - McDougall's Most Important Mentor

There are only two people in my lifetime whose words of wisdom I always eagerly awaited\* and one of them was Nathan Pritikin (1915 – 1985). During my final year of Internal Medicine Residency at the University of Hawaii in 1978 I was given a set of audiotape lectures. I felt a sense of relief as I listened and realized someone else had come to similar conclusions to those that I had reached during my time as a [sugar plantation doctor](#) on the Big Island of Hawaii between 1973 and 1976. As a young physician practicing general medicine, I witnessed first-generation Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans thriving on diets

of rice and vegetables. I also saw their children and grandchildren abandon the traditional ways for meat and dairy products, and become fat and sick.

Mr. Pritikin and I first met in May of 1979. During his visit to the island of Oahu, Hawaii, I invited him to my humble tract home in Kailua for dinner. Mary served him and his wife Ilene a simple meal of whole-grain bread, pasta, red sauce, and confetti rice salad. Peach pie was our dessert. He said he liked the meal a lot. He autographed a copy of his new book, *The Pritikin Program for Diet & Exercise* for me.

On his next visit to Hawaii in October of 1982, we spent two days together. I was able to have him substitute for a scheduled speaker at the regular noontime doctor's conference at Straub Clinic & Hospital. He was well received except for one rude physician. I thought this doctor might have felt threatened by a non-medically trained person trying to teach him about curing patients with food. The next morning I arranged for a special breakfast meeting in his honor with the medical staff and medical students at The Queens Medical Center. Only two doctors attended. One shoveled greasy bacon and eggs into his mouth. Neither seemed interested in this physically small man whose big idea was to wipe out heart disease.

First generation refers to persons born in another land who migrated to Hawaii as young adults to start new lives on the sugar plantations. The habits they learned early on, including preferences for kinds of foods, stayed with them for their lifetime. As a result they remained trim and mostly disease-free. Second, and subsequent generations, born in Hawaii, were influenced by Western ways. They learned to enjoy bacon and eggs, hamburgers, and pizza. Abandoning the diet of their ancestors, based on rice and vegetables, they became overweight and obese. Heart disease, breast, prostate, and colon cancers, diabetes, arthritis, and multiple sclerosis—all diseases unknown before the migration—soon afflicted these people.

#### Nathan Pritikin: A Casual Conversation with Dr. John McDougall, 1982



That afternoon, I brought Mr. Pritikin to the Hawaii PBS TV station in Honolulu and made this remarkable recording. He has never been seen more relaxed and revealing.

That evening we held a potluck dinner for Mr. Pritikin at the Kaneohe Yacht Club in Kaneohe, Hawaii. Over 225 people, many who were my patients, made McDougall-style meals for him to taste. He said he loved the food. After dinner we walked together to his car to say goodbye. Mary gave him approximately 100 of her recipes. At that time the food served at the Pritikin Center in Santa Monica, California had a reputation for being unimaginative and rather tasteless. He went on to use some of Mary's recipes in his book, *The Pritikin Promise* (1983). An acknowledgment in this book was to Dr. and Mrs. John A. McDougall. To be honest it should have been to Mary only, for her recipe contribution. I believe that it was no coincidence that the food served at the

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Pritikin Center improved greatly afterwards. The last time I saw this giant in human nutrition was at his center in Santa Monica, California in 1983. My work stands solidly on his shoulders and I offer this account of our brief relationship, with my gratitude for the profound difference he made in my life.

I greatly regret his untimely death in 1985 at age 69. The world would have been a better place if he had survived another decade or two. For one, *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution* would have never become as big as it did in the 2000s. The world would have never heard of the most popular diets these days, the low-carb, Paleo Diets. His wisdom and strength would have stopped this "nutritional nonsense" before it ever got started. We would not be suffering the current US financial fiasco caused in large part by the worst healthcare crisis ever known. [People in the United States would not be known, as they are today](#), for being less healthy, having more chronic disease and disability, and dying at a younger age than people living in other wealthy nations." Maybe this remarkable man could even have delayed the earth's inhabitants predicted demise due to climate change.

But, there is no time for remorse; the world is in dire need of a return to our traditional starch-based diets.

### **A Brief History of the Life of Nathan Pritikin**

Born in Chicago in 1915, Nathan Pritikin was diagnosed with near-fatal coronary artery disease in his early forties. His highest cholesterol was reported to be 280 mg/dL. Research to save his own life led him to develop a low-fat, low-cholesterol, high-carbohydrate diet to treat epidemic Western illnesses. He was able to lower his own cholesterol to below 150 mg/dL and relieve all signs and symptoms of heart disease. His diet was very similar to the McDougall Diet except for the use of small amounts of skim milk products, lean beef, chicken, and fish (very small amounts). It was also lower in salt and his program emphasized strenuous exercise.

He spent his early life as an engineer and inventor, patenting chemical and electrical products for corporations like Bendix and Honeywell. He never had formal medical training. In 1958 he was diagnosed with a lymphoma (a blood cancer). His last few months of suffering, from this disease and the treatments, caused him to take his own life at age 69 in 1985.

During his career he published several national best-selling books and his team published [over 100 scientific papers](#) in some of the world's most respected peer reviewed medical journals. He founded his longevity center in Santa Barbara in 1974, then moved it to the old Del Mar Hotel on the beach in Santa Monica in 1978. Thousands of people attending his live-in programs saw their heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, and obesity reverse, almost overnight. [A variant of the original](#) Pritikin Program is still operating in Florida.

After his death a thorough [autopsy](#) was performed and the results were published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. His heart was remarkably free of disease and the coronary arteries were completely open, proving one last time that he was right.

One of my favorite writings of Nathan Pritikin was the article [High Carbohydrate Diets: Maligned and Misunderstood](#), published in the Winter 1976 issue of *The Journal of Applied Nutrition*.

\*The other person whose every word I hung onto was [Henry Heimlich, MD](#), founder of the Heimlich maneuver. One of my greatest honors was that when he became ill, Dr. Heimlich came to my clinic for help.