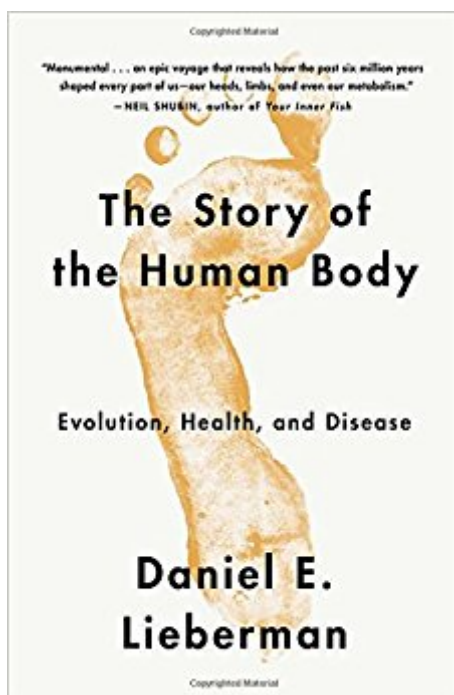


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The Story Of The Human Body: Evolution, Health, And Disease



Synopsis

In this landmark book of popular science, Daniel E. Lieberman gives us a lucid and engaging account of how the human body evolved over millions of years. He illuminates the major transformations that contributed to key adaptations to the body: the rise of bipedalism; the shift to a non-fruit-based diet; the advent of hunting and gathering; and how cultural changes like the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions have impacted us physically. He shows how the increasing disparity between the jumble of adaptations in our Stone Age bodies and advancements in the modern world is occasioning a paradox: greater longevity but increased chronic disease. And finally—provocatively—he advocates the use of evolutionary information to help nudge, push, and sometimes even compel us to create a more salubrious environment and pursue better lifestyles. [With charts and line drawings throughout.]

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In thoroughly enjoyable and edifying prose, Lieberman, professor of human evolution at Harvard, leads a fascinating journey through human evolution. He comprehensively explains how evolutionary forces have shaped the human species as we know it, from the move to bipedalism, and the changes in body parts—from hands to feet and spine—that such a change entailed, to the creation of agrarian societies, and much more. He balances a historical perspective with a contemporary one—examining traits of our ancestors as carefully as he looks to the future—while asking how we might control the destiny of our species. He argues persuasively that cultural evolution is now the dominant force of evolutionary change acting on the

human body, and focuses on what he calls mismatch diseases that are caused by lack of congruence between genes and environment. Since the pace of cultural evolution has outstripped that of biological evolution, mismatch diseases have increased to the point where most of us are likely to die of such causes. Lieberman's discussion of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and breast cancer are as clear as any yet published, and he offers a well-articulated case for why an evolutionary perspective can greatly enrich the practice of medicine. Agent: Max Brockman, Brockman Inc. (Oct.) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Like it or not, we are slightly fat, furless, bipedal primates who crave sugar, salt, fat, and starch. Harvard professor Lieberman holds nothing back in his plea that people listen to the story of human evolution consisting of five biological transformations (walking upright, eating a variety of different foods, accumulating physical traits aligned to hunting and gathering, gaining bigger brains with larger bodies, and developing unique capacities for cooperation and language) and two cultural ones (farming and reliance on machines). Unfortunately, human beings now create environments and presently practice lifestyles that are clearly out of sync with the bodies they've inherited. This mismatch results in myriad problems, including Type 2 diabetes, myopia, flat feet, and cavities. Lieberman cleverly and comprehensively points out the perils of possessing Paleolithic anatomy and physiology in a modern world and bemoans just how out of touch we have become with our bodies. Natural selection nudges all life-forms toward optimality rather than a state of perfection. If we want to continue our phenomenal run as a species, it is essential to understand (and embrace) our evolutionary legacy. --Tony Miksanek --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Daniel E. Lieberman, a widely respected and well-established researcher on myriad subjects concerning the human body, outlines quite effectively the underlying reasons that so many of us, in this modern age, have engaged in the trade-off of increased morbidity for increased longevity. Starting millions of years ago with the rise of our likely progenitor genus, the australopithecines, Lieberman walks us through the accumulated adaptations that led to us, including habitual bipedalism and changes in diet. While it might seem a bit academic for a reader who is solely interested in "human" health, he deftly keeps the material from becoming too dense and succeeds in tying this seeming distraction to our current plight through an analysis of energy intake and expenditure. The story that Lieberman tells of our body is one of mostly slow progression, a tweak here and there over a vast span of time, to shape our bodies for endurance

and to withstand hardship. At its core, however, the book is a cultural critique, and evolution is the vehicle in which it is delivered. With the advent of agriculture and subsequent industrialization millennia later, humans have too effectively altered their environments to suit their desires (which do not necessarily match our needs). Our food is too soft and bereft of nutrition due to ever-"improving" production processes. We possess and make use of too many gadgets that handle too much of our workloads. Our medical practices spend too much time fighting symptoms instead of making use of our evolutionary knowledge to prevent mismatches, diseases and ailments that stem from this "dysevolution". Lieberman makes an argument that is difficult to find fault with, but he also pragmatically addresses the fact that we are far past the point of return in regard to overall social organization. We cannot return to a life of hunting and gathering; there are simply too many of us now. Our artificial inflation of the planet's carrying capacity has necessitated that we continue in this vein. Instead, at the end of the book he proposes a kind of "soft paternalism", or the use of authoritative influence to tailor the choices of adults much as a diligent parent does for their child. While this proposal might draw the ire of people of certain political backgrounds who would decry the formation of a "nanny state", I would argue that, in the light of our evolutionary history, this type of reciprocal encouragement (healthier people make for a healthier society) fits like a glove on our unusually adapted hands.

We are all products of evolution. Nature has selected us to be here, still surviving and multiplying. In a relatively short time on this planet, Homo Sapiens have become a very successful species. In terms of body mass and technology, we dominate the world around us, sometimes bending it to our needs. With all our technology, our activities often create mismatches with our evolutionary tendencies. For example, we evolved from hunter gatherers, not Twinkie eaters. Our diet, our tendency to remain indoors, sitting for long periods, drinking alcohol, living alone, are all activities that our bodies were not designed for. The book explains how these mismatches may be causing us to have both physical and psychological maladies that are not easily understood or treated with modern technology. Excellent book.

Ever tried to explain to your kids what sets humans apart from chimps, except writing poetry & using iPhones? Curious myself, I have and have struggled to find sources. The first half of the book provides a convincing tale of what makes us - physically - humans, and likely reasons for becoming what we are, from the African savannah to the adverse consequences of farming. Great explanations that should be taught in schools (though some questions remain: for example, why

baboons in the same environment did not evolve to be like us?). If you have any interest in evolution and humans, you need the first part of the book. The second part presents an interesting and credible paradigm, interesting facts and sound proposals for personal and public health. However, perhaps because I am more familiar with the science and though the author is careful to insert caveats, I would say currently available evidence is sometimes stretched to fit a paradigm, and I had to say a couple of times: oh, no, not Rousseau again. I am aware that pygmies - among other partial hunter-gatherers - have lifestyles which is difficult not to admire. But, not being an anthropologist, the author made me wonder if disturbing facts about the lives of hunter-gatherers have been omitted. As for the prescriptions, in fact, I agree with the author and enthusiastically endorse some of his ideas; yet, my wife's comment that the second part could easily turn into a more sensible "China study", with a cadre of adept followers, is not off the mark. There is this bit of a crusading tone in this second part which convinced me to give it 4 stars only. Also worth reading but with one or two grains of salt.

The first part of this book is really worth the 5 stars on its own. An excellent, well-cited breakdown of key developments in the evolution of hominids to Homo sapiens. The last half deals with how these traits are at loggerheads with today's environment. I had several eureka-like moments reading this. I give apparent fads like barefoot running or "paleo" dieting more credence after the read. The crux of the argument is that many common lifestyle-related diseases of modern life are evolutionary mismatches. If we modify our lifestyles to not run counter to our biology, we might improve our health and quality of life. Compelling.

If your interested in evolution of the human species than buy this book. Basically covers everything you need to know about how we came to be. Has a heavy emphasis on science, structural anatomy, and the study of human movement (kinesiology). If none of that interest you then you might want to skip this one. I found it really interesting though.

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