



# communicating Food for Health

## Penn's Potato Diet

By James J. Kenney, PhD,  
FACN

Penn Jillette, for those unfamiliar with the “Penn & Teller” magic act, is a long-time Las Vegas entertainer, TV personality, and the author of several books. His latest book discusses his rather atypical approach to weight loss. [<https://www.amazon.com/Presto-Pounds-Disappear-Other-Magical/dp/1501140183>]. If one is familiar with Penn Jillette, then it should come as no surprise that Penn's approach to weight loss was a radical departure from the conventional. Approaching his 60th birthday at 330 lbs and with a systolic blood pressure topping 200 mmHg, Penn underwent heart surgery for blocked heart arteries. After the heart surgery Penn's doctor recommended he undergo bariatric surgery to help him lose the excess weight. While bariatric surgeries have become an increasingly conventional medical treatment for severely obese

people like Penn Jillette with serious co-morbidities, Penn's skyrocketing blood pressure despite consuming numerous prescription drugs made it apparent that he might not live long enough to see his children reach adulthood. Neither conventional dieting nor increasingly conventional bariatric surgery appealed to the unconventional Penn. However, after the heart surgery he realized that his children were more important to him than another piece of chocolate cake and decided to do something to improve his health.

After one of his shows in Vegas, Penn met Ray Cronise who asked Penn to “interrupt his current relationship with food” via a major lifestyle transformation. Ray Cronise, a NASA scientist turned nutrition and weight loss expert, recommended that Penn start by picking just one food to consume for the next two weeks. Penn chose the potato. He

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December '16

*Professional Member Edition*

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Penn's Potato Diet

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says Chronise told him he could have picked several other starchy plant-based foods like corn or beans, but Penn settled on potatoes. He was told he could have as many potatoes as he wanted and would not have to go hungry or count calories to lose weight. Penn says he ate about five potatoes a day. Penn ate nothing but potatoes, either baked or boiled. No butter, cheese, sour cream or bacon bits... just plain old potatoes. After 14 days of eating nothing but potatoes Penn had lost 14 pounds. After these initial 2 weeks, Penn's weight loss continued as he added bean stew, salad, and other mostly minimally-processed plant-based meals, while seldom consuming animal products and almost no red or processed meats. His weight loss continued even though he ate whenever he got hungry and never counted calories. He also did not start exercising until after he had lost 100 lbs. Penn admits that he had become pretty much addicted to foods loaded with salt, sugar, and/or fat. The extreme "mono diet" Cronise had recommended was designed to break Penn of his unhealthy food cravings for typical modern foods loaded with fat, sugar, refined grains, and added salt. One might say that Penn's diet shifted

away from "living to eat" to an "eating to live" priority so that he could hopefully live a longer and healthier life.

Penn is currently about two years into his weight-loss "adventure" and has now kept off the 100 lbs he lost in the first 3-4 months for about a year and a half. His drug resistant hypertension is now well controlled but with far less need for BP-meds, and no doubt his other CVD risk factors have also improved as well. Penn insists that today he is eating whatever he wants, but notes that that what he wants to eat now has profoundly changed. He reports his cravings for salty, fatty, and sugar-rich foods are now largely gone. He does report that he still eats the occasional (once every few weeks) typical modern food, but claims that his desire for such foods is now largely gone. For more on Penn's take on his largely plant-based, low-salt, diet here's a link: [[http://bigthink.com/videos/penn-jillette-on-losing-100lbs-of-weight?utm\\_source=Big+Think+Weekly+Newsletter+Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=fa7e32587a-Newsletter\\_10051610&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_6d098f42ff-fa7e32587a-38367942](http://bigthink.com/videos/penn-jillette-on-losing-100lbs-of-weight?utm_source=Big+Think+Weekly+Newsletter+Subscribers&utm_campaign=fa7e32587a-Newsletter_10051610&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6d098f42ff-fa7e32587a-38367942)]. I would describe Penn's current eating plan as a low

calorie dense version of a DASH-style or Pritikin-style diet.

### **What Can We Learn From Penn's Experience?**

Well, the first thing is that potatoes and other minimally-processed high-carbohydrate foods do not promote obesity, despite numerous reports that claim that eating potatoes is associated with obesity or somehow promotes overeating and obesity. Here's one example, "Walter C. Willett, who chairs the Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, has been warning us about potatoes for years. Here's what he says in his book, Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy: The Harvard Medical School Guide to Healthy Eating. (Full disclosure: I [Patrick J. Skerrett] co-authored this book.) 'Nutritionists and diet books alike often call potatoes a 'perfect food.'" But while eating potatoes on a daily basis may be fine for lean people who exercise a lot or who do regular manual labor, for everyone else potatoes should be an occasional food consumed in modest amounts, not a daily vegetable. The venerable baked potato increases levels of blood sugar and insulin more quickly and to higher levels..." (Continued at <https://foodandhealth.com/penns-potato-diet/>).

## Group Project Tip:

I did a lot of group projects during my time at Johnson and Wales University. As various groups of students and I put together our projects and papers, I found that the fastest way to get group projects done was through text.

Texting the group and collaborating via text was the quickest and most effective way for us to communicate. We also had good luck with conference calls.

Anyway, I just thought that this tip might come in handy for you!

## Brag List:

Have you ever struggled with an effective way to present yourself as an expert or mentor without either selling yourself short or looking like a braggart?

I found a fantastic resource from Peggy Klaus during a recent session of my Palo Alto "Lean In" group: The Brag List.

Klaus, author of the fantastic book [BRAG! The Art of Tooting Your Own Horn Without Blowing It](#), has assembled a list of 12 questions that educators can ask themselves in order to identify and then celebrate their accomplishments.

Questions on this list include:

- "What would you and others say are five of your personality pluses?"
- "How does your job/career use your skills and talents, and what projects are you working on right now that best showcase them?"
- "In what ways are you making a difference in people's lives?"

You can access the full list at [http://www.peggyklaus.com/wp-](http://www.peggyklaus.com/wp-content/uploads/Proff-Take12BRAG.pdf)

[content/uploads/Proff-Take12BRAG.pdf](http://www.peggyklaus.com/wp-content/uploads/Proff-Take12BRAG.pdf).

I find this exercise to be extraordinarily helpful when it comes to writing about myself, introducing myself at cooking demonstrations and presentations, and sending in project proposals.

How will you use *your* brag list?

## What is a Hack?

One of our readers recently asked me to define a "hack." Since I love sharing everything from kitchen hacks to shopping hacks, I figured I'd better give my definition right away!

I think a hack is a shortcut or a tip to make things easier. It's a popular term on the internet now and I heard it first from Shenoa French!

*By Judy Doherty, PC II, AOS, BS*

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P.O. Box 271108, Louisville, CO 80027  
Phone: 800-462-2352 Fax: 800-433-7435  
<http://communicatingfoodforhealth.com>

#### Executive Editor

Judy Doherty, PC II

#### Contributing Writers

James J. Kenney, PhD, FACN  
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Mail to Food and Health Communications, Inc.

P.O. Box 271108, Louisville, CO 80027;

Phone: 800-462-2352; Fax: 800-433-7435; [orders@foodand-health.com](mailto:orders@foodand-health.com)

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