

# A new diet takes hold on Vashon

By Susan Riemer

When Craig Kopet ventured to Vashon with his wife for an “out-of-Burien experience” last summer, he was a man in pain.

For five years, Kopet, then 60, had been struggling with debilitating tendonitis in his hips and plantar fasciitis, painful inflammation in the soles of the feet. He couldn't sit for more than 20 minutes. He had given up jogging. And despite his knowledge about treating pain — he's a physical therapist who co-owns the practice at the Highline Medical Center — his own cure, from custom orthotics to cortisone injections, had proved elusive.

While on Vashon, his wife came across a flier for a nutrition class meant to decrease inflammation and promote weight loss and better health. His wife suggested he consider taking the class, but he dismissed the idea, noting that his aches and pains were “a mechanical problem,” not something a “nuts and berries Vashon diet” could address.

Kopet encouraged his wife to take the class for her own needs, but as she shops and cooks for the family, he knew he would eat what she ate and signed up for the class as well. By week three, his pain was gone. “I was flabbergasted,” he said. Today, Kopet said, he's not only a pain-free man but also a believer in a diet that is sweeping Vashon.

Since starting her class “Eating for Health and Weight Loss” two years ago, Island herbalist Kathy Abascal has introduced 700 people to a diet she developed to counter inflammation in the body through food — excluding some foods, adding others and emphasizing fruits and vegetables. It's a big change for many people, and Absacal acknowledges that altering eating patterns can be difficult. But for many people — like Kopet — the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Some have lost dozens of pounds, weight they've kept off. People who struggled with fatigue have reclaimed their energy. Many people have reduced their medications for a range of health problems, including high blood pressure and cholesterol, diabetes, allergies, asthma and arthritis.

So profound was Kopet's experience that he invited Abascal to teach at Highline Medical Center.

At the heart of the class are nutritional recommendations for calming the inflammatory process in the body, which is present with many health problems. While some think of inflammation as the body's response to an injury, such as a sprained ankle, in fact inflammation is much more pervasive than that and plays a role in many health problems, according to Abascal.

"When anything goes wrong in the body, the immune system will get involved and will try to help solve the problem," Abascal said. Health problems are created from the inflammation process itself: Fatigue, joint and muscle aches, sinus problems, headaches and digestive ailments may all spring up. "Diet calms that chronic inflammatory response," Abascal noted.

When students take the five-week class, Abascal recommends eliminating for three weeks the most commonly inflammatory foods: all dairy products, sugars, wheat, red meat, pork, alcohol and peanuts. Instead of those foods, students are encouraged to eat anti-inflammatory foods, such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, proteins from beans and soy, seafood, chicken, eggs, seeds and nuts. She recommends people eat five times a day, with fruits and vegetables generally making up two-thirds of each meal or snack and protein and grains making up no more than one-third. People can eat as much as they want in each sitting.

"We are focused on health, not portion control or calories. Weight loss tends to follow automatically," Abascal said. After three weeks of abstaining from some of their old staples, students systematically add some of them back in to see how their bodies respond. Some are surprised at the effects of foods they had never known to be troublesome. Kopet was one of them. One day after his pain was gone, he had a soy latte, and, he said, his pain came "roaring back." Now he knows it is from the sugar in the soy milk. His pain abated over the next couple days when he returned to the diet.

It was a physical reaction that does not surprise Abascal. "You can't be eating foods that inflame your body and quiet inflammation at the same time," she said. She knows this from first-hand experience.

In January of 2007, Abascal threw out her back and had ongoing problems with her shoulders freezing up. Her ankles were always stiff in the morning, her weight had crept up, and so had her blood pressure. She went to see a doctor for her back pain, and his recommendation was non-steroidal anti-inflammatories, such as ibuprofen. She left the office feeling gloomy, she said, as though her health were on a downhill slope.

Then she decided to try to reverse that trend and began researching the biochemistry of nutrition. On the Island, Abascal is known as a well-studied herbalist, but she has a wealth of education beyond that. Her undergraduate degree was in neurobiology with a minor in biochemistry. She practiced law for 10 years and left the profession to study herbs with respected herbalist Michael Moore. She has been working at Minglement since 1999 and has a private herbal practice.

What she learned in her research for herself influenced her food choices — the same ones she encourages in her class — and she saw results. Within two to three weeks of being on her new eating plan, she had lost weight, and her ankles were no longer stiff, she said. Given her success, she invited some friends to be part of a pilot program that she led. They lost weight, she said, and some of their health symptoms began to improve. Three to four months had passed by then, and she had lost 30 pounds and had dropped eight inches off her waist. Her shoulders no longer ached, and her blood pressure was back to normal.

“I found it really easy to apply at that point and began to teach it,” she said. Indeed, that ease in applying the concepts to daily living is apparent when she instructs others. In a classroom at Minglement, with a slide show running, Abascal, a youthful 60, easily explains to a group of 20 or so people the scientific ins and outs how inflammation runs amok in the body and why they might want to cut out T-bone steaks and beef up their intake of fruits and vegetables.

Not yet two years after her first class, the success of the course is clearly visible on Vashon. Thriftway has a section dedicated to anti-inflammatory foods and many Islanders talk with fervor about their successes.

Photographer Sam Van Fleet took the class last summer. At age 50, after 25 years of digestive woes, he had just been diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome, which includes a host of digestive problems. “I just thought, ‘Well, I don’t want that,’” he said. His wife Sarah Van Fleet, who wanted to lose weight, planned to take Abascal’s class, and asked him to join her in it. His symptoms diminished by day three, he said. Within a month they were gone — and have stayed away.

“The benefits were so dramatic and came on so quickly, my wife and I were pretty well hooked,” he said. Sam also experienced other health benefits from the class, he added. He called himself “borderline hypoglycemic” before the class, someone who had to eat five or six times a day to keep his blood sugar up. Now he only needs three meals a day. His cholesterol is down 20 points, and people have commented to him that his skin glows; he attributes that to all the avocados and good oils he eats.

Some students comment on the volume of content in the course, and several take it more than once. “I try to teach an adult course,” Abascal said, noting that she thinks it is important students understand the science behind her recommendations. “Understanding it — owning it — is key,” she said.

Moira Gray, 51, took the class last May. She just did not feel good, she said. She was significantly overweight and had no energy. She saw Abascal in her private practice and began making changes immediately, before taking the class. “The first thing I noticed was that my energy level tripled in just a few days,” she said. She has lost 60 pounds in the last year. Her diet is rich in fresh fruits and vegetables now, and she has become adventuresome in what she eats. Her favorite breakfast now is red quinoa with fruits and nuts added. “It’s not a diet,” she added. “It’s a way of living with food.”

Joanne Berg, 61, shares a similar story. “I was a couch potato. I sat on the couch and flicked through the channels, eating popcorn,” she said. Her favorite food was ice cream. She has lost 80 pounds. After starting the program, she developed a huge amount of energy, she said, so much that she had to find an outlet for it. She started to walk and then could not walk fast enough, so she started to run. Her kids gave her a bike for her 60th birthday, and now she bikes to work at Vashon Print and Design every day and in January completed a half marathon. She did not eat fruits or

vegetables before. Now one of her favorite foods is roasted cauliflower with olive oil and spices. She has been known to eat a whole head for dinner. “I feel like a different person,” she said. “Emotionally I feel bright and light and clear.”

The eating program does not work for everyone, of course. Abascal said some people do not follow it as closely as they might; others may have to weed out a food they are still reacting to.

As for physical therapist Kopet, these days he is enjoying his Vashon diet of nuts and berries, with eggs, lean meat and vegetables rounding it out. His blood sugar has stabilized, and he can sit — pain free — at his desk and be focused all day long. He has lost 20 pounds and is at his high school weight. “It’s quite amazing,” he said. “It’s the best eating program I know of.”



Kathy Abascal stands before a spread of food at Vashon Cohousing during a recent potluck featuring the anti-inflammatory foods she advocates.