



## Fad Diets

“Lose belly fat first”  
“Burn calories while you sleep” “  
“Lose weight without feeling hungry”  
“Melt body fat without exercise.”

These are just a few of the claims made by some of the more popular fad diets. With promises like these, who wouldn't expect rapid weight loss with little to no effort? It's no wonder people continue to dabble in fad diets. But if these diets truly work, why are so many Americans still overweight? And, if they don't work, why do Americans continue to buy into them?

### Sensational vs. Sensible

Ah, the seduction of the quick fix! Rather than taking a sensible, lifestyle approach to weight loss, fad diets tend to sensationalize messages in hopes of capturing a share of the lucrative diet market. Many fad diets espouse the “miracles” of some foods or food groups while condemning others. Examples include the cabbage soup or grapefruit diets, “food combining” diets, and of course, the numerous low-carbohydrate diets.

Such fad diets seem to make weight loss simple by proposing taking a hard line about food choices. But repeat dieters and health experts alike know that setting severe limits on food choices is a recipe for failure. Despite stories of short-term success, such regimens have a high failure rate because even the most motivated participants have a hard time sticking with menus that don't forgive deviations from limited food choices and exacting portion sizes. They just don't take into account the real world of personal taste preferences, time constraints, and varying kitchen skills.

It gets worse. Such restrictive diets can be unbalanced and lead to dangerous nutrient deficiencies. People on them can feel “zapped” of energy. So it's not surprising that the extremist

approaches to food selection are not endorsed by major health organizations.

- The American Dietetic Association, which represents more than 70,000 dietitians, recommends a healthy eating plan that can be followed for a lifetime: eating a variety of foods while watching portion sizes and calories along the way (1,2).
- Likewise, the USDA's Dietary Guidelines suggest building a healthy diet from a variety of foods and does not categorize specific foods as good or bad (3).

### Weight Loss at What Price?

Why are there so many success stories documenting rapid weight loss on fad diets? Simple: **Any diet that restricts calories will lead to weight loss.**

Because they severely restrict food choices, fad diets, such as the currently popular low-carbohydrate diets are typically very low in calories. Cutting carbohydrates, out of the diet essentially eliminates four of the five major food groups. With so few foods to choose from, less food is consumed; and, voila! – weight is lost.

The promoters of low carbohydrate diets would lead consumers to believe vegetables, particularly those high in starch content, are fattening. This is untrue! Starchy vegetables are generally low in fat or fat free, and low in sodium. Starchy vegetables provide so much more than calories – many are also high in essential vitamins and minerals. Take the potato, for example. A medium sized potato, weighing in at 5.3 ounces, provides a mere 100 calories, no fat and just nine percent of the daily value for carbohydrate. It rivals other fruits and vegetables in fiber content, has nearly half the daily requirement for vitamin C, and provides more potassium than a banana.

Weight lost on fad diets can be fast but fleeting. Our metabolism is such that the body can only shed about one to two pounds of body fat per week while

keeping lean body mass and fluid stores intact. Losing more than two pounds per week is a clue that body fluid and/or lean tissue – not fat – is being eliminated. What's more, weight that is lost rapidly is generally regained equally rapidly (plus a couple "extra" pounds) once the individual goes "off" the diet.

There is a better, more positive way to cut calories.

### Sound Advice (at last)

Prevailing science shows that calories still count. The simplest way to monitor calories is to reduce portion sizes. This doesn't have to mean bringing out your scales and measuring spoons. Read food labels; portion out foods from boxes or bags, and use visual clues like these to size up a serving:

- One half bagel = diameter of a large coffee thermos lid
- One half cup of rice, fruit or most vegetables = half a baseball
- One medium piece of fruit or potato = a baseball
- One cup of chopped greens = a tennis ball
- 3-ounce serving of meat = a deck of cards
- Slice of cheese = floppy computer disk

Practice caution with fad diets since there isn't enough good research to support their effectiveness or safety for the long term. A sound weight management program should be based on scientific research and have flexible menus featuring a variety of foods. It should recommend regular exercise, gradual weight loss and guidelines for weight maintenance for long term success.

Refer to the following clues adapted from The International Food Information Council (4) for spotting fad diet:

- Claims or implies a large or quick weight loss of more than 1 to 2 pounds per week.
- Promotes magical or miracle foods.
- Restricts or eliminates certain foods, recommends certain foods in large quantities, insists on eating specific food combinations, or offers rigid, inflexible menus.
- Implies that weight can be lost and maintained without exercise and other lifestyle changes.
- Relies heavily on undocumented case histories, testimonials, and anecdotes but has no scientific research to back claims.
- Contradicts what most trusted health professional groups say, or makes promises that sound too good to be true.

- 1) Position of the American Dietetic Association: Weight management. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2002;102:1145-55.
- 2) Freeland-Graves, J, Nitzke, S. Position of the American Dietetic Association: Total diet approach to communicating food and nutrition information. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2002;102:100.
- 3) United States Dept. of Agriculture. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2000, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 2000.
- 4) IFIC Foundation. Fad diets: Look before you leap. *Food Insight.* March/April 2000.

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