

The Scoop on Popular Weight-Loss Diets

Handout 2

Dieting Trends

Fad diets come and go and come around again. Low-carbohydrate diets were popular 30 years ago. Then came the low-fat revolution. By the mid-nineties, low-carbohydrate diets were back. Today, more Americans are overweight than ever before. Something is not working. Although many fad diet books and plans promise quick weight loss, many of the diets are difficult to continue for a long period and are not always nutritious. Despite the fact that people may lose weight initially, often times they easily regain it. At two-year follow-ups, fad diets have a very low success rate.

When selecting a nutrition or diet-related book or program, don't believe the grand claims and testimonials. Look for well-researched books and programs that provide information based on hard science and that have the following characteristics:

- Recommend no more than 1 to 2 pounds weight loss per week.
- Do not go below 1,200 calories per day.
- Refer to Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Food Pyramid.
- Choose sensible portion sizes.
- Encourage exercise.
- Include a variety of nutritionally balanced foods from all food groups.
- Do not have a list of forbidden foods.
- Minimize hunger.
- Do not require special foods or vitamin supplements.
- Encourage setting realistic weight-loss goals and making slow, moderate changes.
- Establish lifelong habits.
- Fit into your lifestyle.

Characteristics of Popular Weight-Loss Diets and Books

Low-Carbohydrate Diets

Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution

1992 – Robert C. Atkins, M.D. Another book: *Health Revolution*

Characteristics: High protein, high fat, low carbohydrate. Claims diet may help people with food intolerances or allergies, heart disease, diabetes, yeast infections. Megavitamin/mineral supplements daily.

Strengths: Weight loss likely will result because the eating plan is low calorie. Blood levels of triglycerides may decrease due to limited carbohydrate intake. High fat intake provides satiety for a long period of time.

Weaknesses: Nutritionally unbalanced. Recommends as little as 15 grams carbohydrate a day. No bread, pasta or cereal. Low fruits and vegetables. Ketoacidosis is encouraged. High in fat and saturated fat.

Comments: Does not teach good eating habits. Can be dangerous. Claims are not nutritionally sound. May initially lose water weight.

The Carbohydrate Addict's Diet

1991 – Rachel Heller, M.D., and Richard Heller, M.D.

Characteristics: People become addicted to sugar because of its effect on insulin levels. Lose weight by controlling the addiction. Two meals a day consist of high protein foods with very low carbohydrate foods. The third meal is high carbohydrate foods balanced with equally high protein foods.

Strengths: Very few. Does allow selected vegetables.

Weaknesses: Nutritionally unbalanced. Some recipes provided are high in saturated fat. Does not promote an overall healthy eating plan. No structured exercise program is recommended.

Comments: Not based on scientific evidence. Carbohydrates, especially from whole grains, fruits and vegetables, are important components of a healthy eating plan.

Protein Power

1996 – Michael Eades, M.D., and Mary Dan Eades, M.D.

Characteristics: Limits intake of carbohydrates to lower insulin levels. Claims insulin causes many health problems, including obesity, heart disease, high cholesterol, hypertension and diabetes. Suggests that by keeping carbohydrate intake low and protein intake high, the body will burn fat faster.

Strengths: Allows more fruits and vegetables than some other high-protein diets.

Weaknesses: High in saturated fat. Restricts whole grains and legumes. Low in calcium.

Comments: Not based on scientific evidence. Does not provide a nutritionally sound eating plan.

South Beach Diet

2003 – Arthur Agoston

Characteristics: Uses the glycemic index to identify good versus bad carbohydrates. Promotes consistent meal times, snacks, a healthy dessert and plenty of water.

Strengths: Encourages fruits, vegetables, legumes and unrefined grains, such as whole-wheat breads and brown rice.

Weaknesses: The first phase promotes potentially dangerous accelerated weight loss. Needlessly restricts carbohydrate foods that are high in essential nutrients such as carrots, bananas, pineapple and watermelon. Emphasizes a higher intake of animal protein and saturated fat by reducing carbohydrates.

Comments: The book is full of inconsistencies. Not based on scientific evidence.

Sugar Busters

1998 – Edited by Stewart Leighton. By three physicians and a businessman.

Characteristics: Sugars and foods high in sugar are claimed to be “toxic” and the root of all health problems, including obesity, diabetes and heart disease. These are attributed to insulin that regulates sugar. To “bust” sugar out of the diet, the book recommends avoiding foods with high glycemic indexes (fruits and vegetables) and compensating with protein (meat) and fat.

Strengths: Research has linked diets high in refined sugars with obesity, dental caries and overall poorer diet quality. Reducing the amount of refined sugars consumed may lower the risk for these health problems.

Weaknesses: Promotes foods high in cholesterol and saturated fat. Eliminates many foods that provide essential vitamins and minerals. Recommends not drinking “excessive” fluids (water) with meals. No basis to claim fluids “bypass proper chewing,” “dilute digestive juices.”

Comments: Insulin plays essential role in energy balance. Carbohydrates are important in diet. No scientific evidence for claims made. Claims are false. Not recommended.

The Zone Diet

1995 – Barry Sears, Ph.D.

Characteristics: “Enter the Zone” maintains that carbohydrates are bad because they raise your blood sugar level and cause the release of the hormone insulin — supposed monster hormone. Claims insulin makes it difficult to become thin by turning carbohydrate foods into fat rather than using them for energy.

Strengths: Promotes eating regular meals low in calories. Restricts fat to no more than 30 percent of total calories.

Weaknesses: Promotes diet higher in protein, lower in carbohydrates than recommended. Carbohydrates, not proteins, are the preferred source of energy. If protein is used for energy, nitrogen must be removed. This can overtax the kidneys. Excessive protein intake can increase the risk for gout. Metabolic pathways supposedly connecting diet, insulin-glucogen and eicosanoids sound impressive but do not exist. Carbohydrates and insulin don’t make you fat. Eicosanoids don’t cause disease.

Comments: The Zone is based on half-truths, mixed messages and theories, not grounded in peer-reviewed research. There is nothing magical about The Zone Diet, it’s just a very low-calorie diet.

Other Diets

Dieting for Dummies

1998 – Jane Kirby, R.D., and The American Dietetic Association

Characteristics: Provides scientifically sound information about many topics related to weight loss. Includes sections about developing a relationship with food, a plan for healthy living, shopping, cooking and dining out.

Strengths: No dietary restrictions or weight loss gimmicks. Promotes eating well-balanced meals and exercising to achieve weight management.

Weaknesses: None.

Comments: Realistic plan for weight control. Advocates reasonable and attainable lifelong healthy eating and exercise habits.

Dr. Phil’s Ultimate Weight Solution: The 7 Keys to Weight Loss Freedom

2003 – Phillip McGraw, Ph.D.

Characteristics: Behavior modification and cognitive restructuring, along with a healthy diet can lead to permanent weight management. Foods are divided into two categories: high response foods (good) and low response foods (bad).

Strengths: Recycles behavior modification strategies that have been used for years in weight control programs. Suggests enlisting a “circle of support” including a nutritionist with technical expertise.

Weaknesses: Includes erroneous or outdated nutrition information and dietary recommendations.

Comments: Dr. Phil offers nothing new, but provides a sensible guide for restructuring lifestyles and habits to make room for healthy eating and exercise.

Eat More, Weigh Less

1993 – Dean Ornish, M.D.

Characteristics: Life Choice vegetarian diet. Low in fat, high in complex carbohydrates and fiber. Believes large changes are easier to make than moderate ones. Includes over 250 appetizing recipes. Ten percent of calories from fat.

Strengths: Heart healthy diet. Does not limit amounts of food (no counting calories). Encourages moderate exercise.

Weaknesses: Advocates giving up all meat, poultry, fish, oils, dairy (except nonfat) and products exceeding 2 grams of fat per serving.

Comments: May be difficult to follow long-term, especially for non-vegetarians.

The Paleo Diet

2002 – Loren Cordain, Ph.D.

Characteristics: Suggests that by eating like our ancestors did 2.5 million years ago, risk for developing several chronic diseases decreases and will lead to weight loss at the same time. Basic tenets are to eat unlimited lean meats, fish, seafood, fruits and non-starchy vegetables and avoid cereals, legumes, dairy products and processed foods. Briefly mentions the importance of exercise.

Strengths: Recommends high intake of fruits and vegetables and reduced intake of saturated fat. Suggests eating fewer processed foods.

Weaknesses: Promotes avoidance of cereals, legumes and dairy products, which provide large quantities of many important nutrients, including vitamins, minerals and fiber.

Comments: Not a realistic approach for most people in today’s society both from a nutritional and an environmental standpoint.

The New Pritikin Program

1990 – Robert Pritikin Another book: *The Pritikin Principle*

Characteristics: Designed for lifelong nutrition, weight loss and prevention of diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer and diabetes. High in fiber and complex carbohydrates, low in fat. Low in cholesterol, sugars, salt, alcohol, coffee and tea. Foods categorized as “Go,” “Caution” or “Stop.” Includes stress management.

Strengths: Exercise is encouraged. Variety of foods daily. Adequate carbohydrate, emphasizing complex carbohydrates. May be beneficial for some disease states, such as heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Weaknesses: Only 10 percent of calories from fat. May not provide sufficient amounts of healthy fats (polyunsaturated fats, monounsaturated fats and omega-3 fatty acids) and fat-soluble vitamins. Recommends limiting low-fat dairy and avoiding whole dairy. For fast weight loss, recommends 1,000 calories/day for women and 1,200 calories/day for men.

Comments: May be difficult to follow long-term due to low fat intake.

Recommended Strategies for Healthy Weight

In order to maintain body weight, calorie expenditure must be in balance with caloric intake. To lose weight, expenditure must be greater than intake. Since most adults tend to gain weight over time, even small decreases in calorie intake or increases in calorie expenditure – as little as 50 to 100 calories a day – can help avoid weight gain. A deficit of 500 calories a day can lead to a one pound per week weight loss. Up to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day may be needed to prevent weight gain. As much as 60 to 90 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity is recommended to sustain weight loss.

According to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the healthiest way to reduce calorie intake is to reduce one's intake of added sugars, fats and alcohol which provide calories but few if any nutrients. Eat bulky foods that are high in water content and are low in calories such as vegetables, fruits and certain soups. Such foods will help you feel satisfied. Controlling portion sizes will also help limit calorie intake.

When it comes to body weight control, it is calories that count – not the proportion of fat, carbohydrates and protein in the diet. Acceptable ranges for nutrients that provide calories are 20 to 35 percent of total calories for fat, 45 to 65 percent of total calories for carbohydrates and 10 to 35 percent of total calories for protein.

Breaking the Behavior Chain

Behavior modification techniques can help alter poor eating habits. Begin by recording your eating habits to identify places, emotions or activities that lead to inappropriate eating.

To change those habits, use simple modification techniques. For example, make a rule to not eat when watching television. When you feel stressed, go for a walk or call a friend instead of eating cookies.

Taking personal responsibility for losing weight, believing you can succeed and having support from family and friends also are important factors in losing weight.

References:

- American Dietetic Association. Popular Diets Reviewed. 2004. http://www.eatright.org/Members/Files/popdiets_fact_2-04.pdf. Accessed 5/05
- J. Anderson and L. Young. Weight Loss Diet Books. 12/98. Reviewed 10/02. <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/foodnut/09364.html>. Accessed 5/05
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005. 6th Edition, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 2005.