

Fad Diets: The Whole Truth

A Three Ring Circus

Pick up a magazine, tune into the news, browse through any bookstore - and you'll discover a new diet book. Some defy logic, basic biochemistry and appetite appeal and should be relegated to the science fiction section. Others promise quick and easy results.

Unfortunately, the one thing most popular diet books have in common is that they seldom promote sound weight loss. If you're confused about which may be appropriate for you or which ones are legitimate, you're not alone. A recent nutrition trends survey conducted by the American Dietetic Association (ADA) revealed that nearly one in four Americans (23%) is confused or frustrated about diet information.

Juggling the Statistics

According to the ADA:

- Fifty-eight million adult Americans are overweight; 40 million are obese; 3 million are morbidly obese
- The number of overweight adults in the United States has risen from 28 percent in 1980 to more than 64 percent in 2002
- Nearly half the American adult population is on a diet
- Each year Americans spend more than \$46 billion on weight -loss products - often for gimmicks that don't work

Best-selling Books Aren't Always the Best Bet

If you're one of the 58 million who wants to lose weight, you might be ready to try just about anything. But before you 'Enter the Zone' or pursue 'Protein Power', take a closer look at the science behind the claims. You may be putting your health at risk, without reaching your weight-loss expectations. For example, several best-selling books tout protein as the answer to weight loss and peak fitness, so it's natural to wonder if these claims have merit. The truth is, they're just that - claims. The theory behind these gimmicks is a mistaken belief that Americans should be eating a high-protein diet rather than focusing on carbohydrates. These current high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets are a rehash of the '60s and '70s protein craze. These diets fell from fashion because they were ineffective over the long run.

The Disappearing Science Trick

Fad diets offer testimonials from "carbohydrate phobics" who swear by high-protein diets. However, they haven't a shred of science to back their promises. Validated science states that a hypothesis is true once tested and clearly demonstrated.

In contrast, fad diets depend on unproved claims based on case histories, testimonials, anecdotal support and unpublished, poorly controlled studies. They fail to use standard protocols such as double-blind, placebo-controlled studies published in peer-reviewed journals to justify their claims.

Some books can be intimidating and convincing to anyone unfamiliar with biochemistry. Jeanne Goldberg, Ph.D., R.D., director of the Nutrition Communication Graduate Program, Tufts University, Medford, Mass., believes the pseudo-science in popular diet books comes across as authoritative, and appears to promise some special secret.

"The books are so confusing and so complicated that the average reader assumes what's stated must be true," she said. "You don't need to be scientifically savvy to eat. You just need some common sense. But people don't want that - they want a miracle."

Other critics say these books simply cash in on the American dream - our quest for a breakthrough in the pursuit of slimness. ADA spokesperson Kathleen Zelman, M.P.H., R.D., said fad diets prevail because there is always somebody desperate to lose 10 pounds, and desperate for a quick fix.

"The problem is the majority believe what the media says, so if it's in print or on television it must be true," Zelman said. "In the end, it becomes increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish fact from fiction."

Why the High-Protein Hype?

The protein craze makes headlines for two reasons. First, distrust of "established" nutrition advice, specifically a backlash against high-carbohydrate diets, continues to grow. Second, the public is weary from adhering to low-fat recommendations, while their weight continues to climb. The truth is, Americans are getting heavier because we are exercising less.

A high-protein diet doesn't build muscle and burn fat as some people may think. Only regular physical activity builds muscle strength and burns stored body fat. Protein is a vital nutrient, but national surveys show virtually all Americans get adequate amounts. Studies show that while some consumers are getting enough grain foods, many are not and consumption of whole grains is far below recommended levels.

Carbs Falsely Accused

Some protein-promoting diets claim that eating carbohydrates is harmful because carbohydrates cause the secretion of the hormone insulin. In truth, insulin is an essential hormone that helps transfer the natural sugars of digested foods from the bloodstream to the body's cells, where these sugars fuel our activities. Many diet books falsely accuse carbohydrate intake for causing cravings, insulin resistance and weight gain for millions of people. There is no scientific evidence that carbohydrates stimulate appetite or lead to fat storage and weight gain.

Balancing Your Health On a Tightrope

Diets high in protein are usually higher in fat and can raise cholesterol, if followed over a long time. Excess protein can also lead to potential health risks, from kidney damage to osteoporosis.

The advent of the Zone diet and its many spin-offs, including the popular South Beach Diet, has turned the high-protein diet into a long-term trend, even though most experts, such as Riska Platt, M.S., R.D., spokesperson for the AHA, scoff at the premise of these diets.

She reports, "Heart disease is still the No. 1 killer in our nation. Weight loss can help reduce your risk of heart disease, if you are overweight. However, losing weight on a high-protein diet can be potentially dangerous to heart health (by raising saturated fat and cholesterol levels).

And if you eliminate carbohydrates you lose out on protective vitamins and minerals from fruits, vegetables and grains."

The "Pull a Rabbit From a Hat" Trick

Nutrition experts say the reason some diets work for some people, at least for a while, has nothing to do with balancing hormones or undoing insulin resistance. If you follow these diets as directed, you take in so few calories - about 800 to 1,400 a day - that you are almost guaranteed to lose weight.

Fad diets inevitably fail because they categorize some foods as "good" and most others as "bad." In truth, all foods can and should fit into a healthful eating plan. The key is to eat a well-balanced, low-fat, high-carbohydrate diet made up of foods you like. Avoid the quick-fix temptation of crash diets and unrealistic regimens that keep you hungry or restrict your food choices. The diets usually don't work and result in mostly water-weight loss, not sustainable losses of body fat.

Looking Good and Living Healthy

So how can you find a way to lose weight and keep it off for good without wrecking your health?

Leading nutrition experts agree the best diet:

- Includes a variety of foods you enjoy from all food groups;
- Promotes weight loss of no more than one to two pounds a week; and
- Uses regular moderate activity to achieve and maintain a reasonable weight.

Let Common Sense Guide You

The bottom line is to shift the focus from shedding pounds to achieving a healthier lifestyle. To do this, trust your instincts, use good judgment when evaluating an eating plan and return to the basics. Grain foods such as bread, cereal, pasta, tortillas and bagels may be one of today's most overlooked weight management tools. "Try moderation and get your diet in line with the MyPyramid Food Guide System," Goldberg advises. "Eat more carbohydrate-rich foods from the grain category."

Six Signs of a Fad Diet

Want to lose weight but are confused by numerous books that promise the latest diet breakthroughs?

Here are some tips from the American Heart Association (AHA) that can help you recognize a fad diet.

Say NO to diets that advocate:

Magic or miracle foods - Foods don't burn or melt fat away. There are no "super foods" that can undo the long-term effects of overeating and lack of activity.

Rapid weight loss - Sound weight loss plans aim for losing no more than one to two pounds per week. Studies show that gradual weight loss increases your success for keeping it off permanently.

No exercise - Simple activities like walking or riding a bike are important tools to losing and maintaining weight loss. Yet many "fad" diets don't emphasize these easy changes. An increase in any daily activities that fit your lifestyle will help you to burn more calories.

Bizarre quantities - Foods that are emphasized or others not allowed, such as unlimited amounts of cabbage soup or grapefruit; or avoiding dairy or carbohydrate-rich foods, should raise concern. Forbidding certain foods or entire food groups, in addition to being unhealthy, may increase the likelihood that you will cheat, binge or just give up on the diet.

Specific food combinations - Eating the "wrong" combination of foods does not cause them to produce toxins or turn to fat. There is no scientific proof that combining or sequencing specific foods enhances weight loss.

Rigid menus - Limiting food choices and adhering to specific eating times is a daunting, unpleasant task. Rather, look for a plan that you can realistically follow for a lifetime - one that emphasizes a variety of grain foods, vegetables, fruits, lean meats and low-fat dairy products.