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FAD DIETS: WHAT'S THE HYPE?

HOW TO CHOOSE A HEALTHY DIET PLAN

Why do we eat? We eat to support our everyday activities and ultimately for survival. We all know that eating nutrient-dense foods has a huge effect on our health and wellness. Scientific evidence has become more exact in figuring out what we should eat to reduce the risk of developing chronic disease. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an estimated 74% of American adults are overweight or obese. Obesity increases the risk for developing many chronic disease states, including heart disease, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, and elevated cholesterol and triglyceride levels. So, a healthful diet plan is important.

Social media allows for constant availability of people claiming to know the best way to maintain or lose weight. Every month, someone on the internet promises a new quick weight loss diet or flashy gimmicks. If you want to lose weight or follow a healthier lifestyle, it's hard to know who to trust. And most fad diets are not based on research. Some may impair your health, physically or mentally, and can even lead to death. But how do you know what is a good diet for you? Who do you listen to? Let's explore how to recognize fad diets, some popular fad diets available now, and possible solutions to developing a healthy eating pattern for better health.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A FAD DIET

According to the Oxford dictionary, a fad is "an intense and widely shared enthusiasm for something, especially one that is short-lived and without basis in the object's qualities." All fad



diets have one thing in common, they propose a temporary solution to an issue that for many people is a lifelong problem. Once the diet is over, the weight is usually regained quickly. Remember, fad diets don't focus on lifestyle modification, which is necessary to keep the weight off. The adage, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is," applies to weight loss solutions, too. When you are thinking about a weight loss or healthy diet plan, evaluate it against the following criteria.

- **Rapid weight loss.** Quick weight loss of more than two pounds a week can be dangerous over a long period of time. When you restrict calories, carbohydrates, or both, the body turns to the muscle energy stores of glycogen. Since there are water molecules attached to glycogen, most people lose water and muscle mass first. The CDC recommends a gradual weight loss of one to two pounds per week for keeping off those lost pounds. A slow and steady weight loss allows you to burn more fat for energy after using your glycogen stores.

- **Magic or miracle foods (or pills) that burn fat.** Foods don't burn fat. If we eat more than we need (too many calories), the extra food energy is stored as fat. To burn fat, increase the number of calories your body needs through physical activity. Increased movement means your body needs more energy. After using its glycogen stores, your body will turn to fat for energy needs.
- **Elimination diets.** Diets that eliminate or severely restrict an entire food group, such as carbohydrates, could also eliminate necessary nutrients the body needs to maintain good health. If you are living with a food sensitivity, food intolerance, or a food allergy, an elimination diet, under the guidance of a gastroenterologist, may help you to identify food triggers that are causing digestive symptoms or health issues.
- **Bizarre quantities of only one food or type of food.** All foods can be a part of a healthy diet. But eating large quantities of one food could lead to intestinal gas, bloating, flatulence, and bad breath. It might also create nutritional imbalances that could have a serious effect on your health.
- **Rigid menus.** Some fad diets allow a very limited selection of foods which must be eaten exactly as written and at a specific time of day. These limited diets don't allow for the taste preferences of a diverse American population. If you don't think you can stay on the diet for the rest of your life, it is not sustainable.
- **Specific food combinations.** There is no scientific evidence that eating foods in certain sequences or combinations has any benefit, including causing rapid fat loss. Some combinations of foods may offer a higher amount of a specific nutrient or allow you to feel fuller longer which may lead to less calorie consumption.
- **The sale of a book or product.** If someone is making money off your weight loss, there may be more benefit for them than for you.



- **Based on testimonials.** Many of the newest diet plans on the market show side-by-side pictures of individuals who have lost weight that also include testimonials from real people hyping their weight loss success. It may also include little or no information about the actual diet without you signing up for more information.
- **No health warnings.** Individuals with chronic diseases such as diabetes or high blood pressure should be encouraged to seek medical advice before going on any diet. Some fad diets can have a serious effect on your health even if you lose weight. The American Heart Association and other health professionals encourage maintaining a healthy weight and emphasize healthy eating patterns instead of dramatic weight loss programs.
- **No increased physical activity.** To lose and maintain weight loss, physical activity needs to be an integral part of any weight loss program. Health professionals recommend you strive to enjoy 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity most days of the week.
- **No quality peer-reviewed research.** Weight loss diets should provide quality studies published by reputable scientific experts or organizations. The studies should provide information about the safety and long-term sustainability of the weight loss. If you are unsure whether the articles are authentic, contact your contact your Extension County Agent for advice.

POPULAR FAD DIETS

The firm of Research and Markets analyzed the use of weight loss products and services globally, and found it valued at \$254.9 billion in 2021, with a growth to \$377.3 billion expected by 2026. Research suggests that replacing empty calories with nutrient-dense whole foods should be the focus of medical nutrition therapy and individuals trying to lose weight or eat for good health. Let's explore diet plans that are on the market today.

Low- and No-carbohydrate Diets

Historically, the two most common popular fad diets have been variations of low-fat or low-carbohydrate diets. Dr. Dean Ornish popularized low-fat diets while Dr. Atkins led the low-carbohydrate trend, which has evolved into the ketogenic, paleolithic, or intermittent fasting trends. These diet plans recommend a high intake of fat or protein but a very low or no intake of carbohydrates. In many individual's diets, excess energy intake comes from processed, and sugary foods or drinks. Therefore, carbohydrate restriction may work in reducing energy intake. These diets are popular because a rapid weight loss occurs right away. Unfortunately, diets that contain less than 500 calories from carbohydrate sources use protein and fat for energy. As a result, lean muscle mass is lost. When the diet is discontinued, the body corrects the water imbalance causing weight gain. An increase in dietary fat may also have unhealthy consequences because individuals may choose butter, coconut oil, fatty meats, or fried foods.

Keto Diet

The goal of the low-carbohydrate, high-fat ketogenic, or keto diet, is to burn fat instead of carbohydrates, forcing the body into ketosis. The plan recommends replacing carbohydrates with unsaturated fats, such as avocados, seeds, and nuts. However, individuals often choose saturated fats instead, such as butter, oil, cheese, and red meat. Normally, carbohydrates are the body's main source of energy. The body converts excess carbohydrates to fat and stores them as fat tissue. On a low- or no-carbohydrate diet,



instead of using carbohydrates as the energy source, your body uses fats from foods and stored fats for energy. But the body needs carbohydrates to completely oxidize the fat. The short supply of carbohydrates causes the fat to breakdown incompletely, forming ketone bodies. To rid the body of these toxic ketones, large amounts of water are excreted. Individuals must drink extra water to avoid dehydration. When the body produces more ketones than the kidneys can get rid of, ketones accumulate in the blood, causing ketosis. Ketosis causes the body to burn calories similarly to a fasting or starvation state. This is an abnormal and dangerous condition, especially over a long period of time. Ketones depress appetite, which is the body's way of conserving energy, so death doesn't occur as soon as starvation begins. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that carbohydrates make up 45% to 65% of total daily calories. That translates to between 225 to 325 grams of carbohydrates per day, if you are on a 2,000 calorie daily diet plan.

Intermittent Fasting

Intermittent fasting focuses on when you eat, not what you eat, alternating between eating and fasting on a regular schedule. Dieters choose a six- or eight-hour window of eating or choose to eat only one meal a few days each week. There are no food restrictions, although it is suggested to limit processed foods. Intermittent fasting does not work for individuals who are breastfeeding or taking medication such as insulin that requires regular food intake. Fasting may also lead to overeating, undereating, or irritability.



Low-Fat Diets

The American Medical Association (AMA) has questioned the safety and effectiveness of high-carbohydrate diets, particularly regarding the diseases they are supposed to prevent. High-carbohydrate diets can lead to lowered immunity and poor wound healing because of lower fat and protein intakes. In the 1970s, The Pritikin Diet, which focused on eating a low-fat, high-fiber diet was popular. Today, it is a wellness center with purchased meals for sale.

The Paleo Diet

The paleolithic, caveman, stone-age, or paleo diet attempts to only include foods that were available during a time of hunter-gatherer tribes. It eliminates food groups, such as grains, dairy, legumes, sugar, and processed foods. Instead, it includes vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, eggs, fish, and lean meats. This highly restrictive diet could lead to vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and a need for additional fiber.

Weight-Loss Programs

There are many businesses or organizations that provide weight loss guidance. These programs may be found through individuals, gyms, or services, and usually sell products to accompany their program. Commercial weight loss programs such as Weight Watchers®, Jenny Craig®, NutriSystem®, Noom®, and Golo® offer a reduced-calorie diet, in the form of prepackaged foods, supplements, and weight loss guidance. They may include an app for tracking points or calories and individual or group counseling. Few can offer documented research that their plan works. Some individuals may find success with these programs, but

long-term maintenance can still be a struggle. Before investing money in these programs, meet with your physician and Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RD or RDN) for a personalized plan for you.

Weight-Loss Products or Diet Aids

There are many weight-loss products on the market, either as a prescription or over-the-counter form. These may take the form of pills, supplements, or beverages. While some may offer temporary weight loss, they may cause side effects and are rarely a part of a sustainable healthy diet plan. There are many weight loss powders, beverage shakes, all-natural herbal products, and fat burning gummies and pills that promise fast weight loss for a price. While some may be effective for short-term weight loss, without dietary behavioral and lifestyle changes, weight maintenance may be difficult to sustain for most individuals, and research has not proven the efficacy or the safety of use. In the past, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has banned products, such as the appetite suppressant PPA (phenylpropanolamine hydrochloride) and the drug ephedra in over-the-counter pills because of serious risk of adverse effects to health and even death. FDA has approved prescriptions for weight loss aids, such as Alli® and the newest weight loss drug Wegovy®, which is an injection taken once weekly. These drugs are designed for you to use under a physician's care AND while following a reduced-calorie, low-fat diet and exercise program until you reach your weight loss goal. Neither are meant to be used by individuals with chronic disease and may have serious side effects.

Meal Replacement Kits

Meal replacement kits, which include premeasured ingredients and recipes delivered directly to your door have become a popular trend. They too have entered the weight loss craze, even offering meals designed for individuals with diabetes or vegan or keto options. While these kits offer convenience, they are rarely written by health-care professionals. Meal planning, grocery shopping, and meal preparation using a healthy diet plan can help you make life-long changes for better health.

TRUSTED RESOURCES

So, who can we trust when looking for resources that are research- or evidence-based? Even the Mayo Clinic sells cookbooks and diet foods for the South Beach Diet and Mayo Clinic Diet. Even U.S. News & World Report has journalists with no credentials writing articles, such as “Best Eating Plans for Diabetes” and the “Best Keto Meal Delivery Services.” At the end of 2022, the top 10 diet and nutrition trends of TikTok™ included lettuce water, healthy coke, and frozen honey. And drinking butter and medium-chain triglyceride oil with coffee, known as bullet-proof coffee, is not advised despite the efforts of some individuals trying to turn a profit from the trend. It has never been easy to sort through the facts and fallacies about food and nutrition. And marketing ploys, clever phrases, wishful thinking, pseudo-science, media hype, and celebrity testimonials don’t help. But no website or social media site is intended to be used for the diagnosis or treatment of a health problem or as a substitute for consulting a licensed health professional.

There are individuals who are credentialed and organizations whose mission is to provide research-based information for consumer informed decisions. Using the National Library of Medicine is a reliable source of peer-reviewed journal articles. They even provide their own publication titled, “Know the Science: How to Make Sense of a Scientific Article” (<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/know->

[science/how-to-make-sense-of-a-scientific-journal-article/overview](https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/know-science/how-to-make-sense-of-a-scientific-journal-article/overview)). The following list is websites developed and maintained by health professionals with knowledge of food and nutrition, especially diet plan resources.

- Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is one of the most trusted sources of food and nutrition, from meal planning and preparation to choices that help reduce the risk of health conditions. <https://www.eatright.org/>.
- The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 helps you to make every bite count with simple tips that set you on a path to healthy eating. <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/resources/consumer-resources>.
- MyPlate is based on the research-based evidence and guidance of the Dietary Guidelines. <https://www.myplate.gov/myplate-plan>.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services MyHealthfinder provides links to reviewed resources on consumer health, helping your family stay healthy. <https://health.gov/myhealthfinder>.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides health information on diseases, health risks, and prevention guidelines. <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/index.html>.
- The Food and Drug Administration regulates food and drugs and oversees dietary supplements. <https://www.fda.gov/about-fda/transparency/fda-basics>.
- Other trusted professionals include university departments of nutrition and the Cooperative Extension Service.

RECOMMENDED DIETS

A healthful eating plan follows an enjoyment of a variety of foods and the maintenance of a healthy weight. Research is well documented that these diet plans work for better health. These include the Mediterranean diet, the DASH diet,



and a vegetarian diet. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 and USDA's MyPlate Plan, also based on scientific research, emphasize eating fruits; vegetables; whole grains; low-fat milk and milk products; protein foods such as seafood, lean meats, and poultry; eggs; legumes (beans and peas); soy products; nuts; and seeds. It also recommends a diet low in added sugars, sodium, saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol; and that stays within your daily calorie needs. These government entities provide resources on topics such as portion size, how to incorporate more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains into your diet, and offer recipes to get you started. Let's look at these three diet plans so you can make educated choices about your diet, instead of following the next fad.

The Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean diet has been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease, metabolic syndrome, diabetes, and certain cancers, while promoting longer life spans and a higher quality of life. It is based on the traditional way of eating in the 21 countries that border the Mediterranean Sea. Basically, it promotes primarily eating plant-based foods, such as fruits and vegetables, while incorporating whole grains, beans, nuts, seafood, lean poultry, and unsaturated fat from extra-virgin olive oil. In 1993, in partnership with the Harvard School of Public Health and the World Health Organization, Oldways (a food and nutrition nonprofit) created the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid as a healthier alternative to the USDA's original food pyramid. You can find

the pyramid, along with resources, including recipes at their website <https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/mediterranean-diet>.

The Dash Diet

The DASH diet is designed to prevent and control hypertension. Promoted by the National Institutes of Health, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NIH NHLBI), the DASH diet is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy foods. It is a well-balanced approach to eating that prioritizes lean meat, fish, and poultry, nuts and beans, and is limited in sugar-sweetened foods and beverages, red meat, and added fats. Because the DASH diet provides daily and weekly nutritional goals, beware of internet plans for a fee. Visit <https://healthyeating.nhlbi.nih.gov/> for more information on how to get started, including recipes.

Vegetarian Diet

Following a vegetarian diet may reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers. Likely, a vegetarian diet will help you choose a variety of healthy plant-based foods, including whole fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and nuts and legumes. There are a variety of vegetarian diets to choose from that determine what you will exclude from your diet. You may have heard the terms lacto-vegetarian, ovo-vegetarian, lacto-ovo vegetarian, pescatarian, or flexitarian. Vegans exclude meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products, as well as foods that contain these products. There are nutrients of concern, so be sure to work with a Registered

Dietitian Nutritionist (RD or RDN) to determine how best to fit a vegetarian plan into your busy lifestyle.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

No healthy eating plan is complete without the addition of physical activity. The second edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines provides evidence-based guidance to help us maintain or improve our health through physical activity. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) recommends that adults need at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, like brisk walking or fast dancing each week, plus muscle-strengthening activities, like lifting weights or doing pushups at least two days each week. They contend that, “New evidence shows that physical activity can help manage more health conditions that Americans already have. For example, physical activity can decrease pain for those with osteoarthritis, reduce disease progression for hypertension and type 2 diabetes, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and improve cognition for those with dementia, multiple sclerosis, ADHD, and Parkinson’s disease.” Their website, <https://health.gov/our-work/nutrition-physical-activity/physical-activity-guidelines/current-guidelines/top-10-things-know>, mentions the health benefits independent of other healthy behaviors, like good nutrition. But physical activity and healthy eating must be combined for good living.

While calories do matter, focusing on food quality is equally important. It’s best to choose a variety of nutrient-dense foods every day. There isn’t one “perfect” way to choose how we eat, but our choices are important for our overall health.

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