

DIETS: FACT-BASED OR FAD-BASED?

Introduction

It seems as though there is always a new miracle diet circulating in the media, internet or by word of mouth. Everyone wants the easy, quick-fix route to weight loss and health but isn't necessarily committed to making the lifestyle changes necessary to achieve these goals. One must remember that, in most cases, people and/or companies are trying to sell a product. This doesn't necessarily mean that there is any basis to the claims they make about products or services that they provide. Often times, rapid weight loss diets can have unwanted side effects and potential dangers associated with them. These, of course, are not what marketers of such products want you to know about. For this reason, it is necessary to become a smart consumer and to know how to spot a hokey fad diet when you see one.

Ten Tip-Offs to Questionable Nutrition Counseling

1. The same diet regime is recommended for all clients, without accounting for your specific needs.
2. Practitioners describe themselves or their practices as "holistic".
3. Claims are made that modern food technology and processing make it impossible to get a balanced diet without supplements and/or dietary supplements are sold in the practitioner's office.
4. Nutritional status is evaluated with diagnostic tests such as hair analysis, applied kinesiology and iridology.
5. Fast, effortless and easy weight loss is promised (may also be promoting a product).
6. Radical or extremely restrictive diets are given (may include lists of "good" and "bad" foods), eliminating important, nutrient-providing foods or entire food groups.
7. Fasting is advised to be the only way to rid the body of toxins.
8. The plan does not include regular physical activity.
9. There is no instruction included in how to prepare your foods at home or modify your favorite recipes.
10. Diet is cited as a cause or cure for most diseases or a number of common, non-specific problems (i.e. headaches, diarrhea, fatigue, etc.). Diet cannot cure most illnesses, but it is thought to help lessen the severity of conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes and gastrointestinal problems.

Evaluating a Proposed Diet Plan

There will always be the latest and greatest diet proposed to shed unwanted pounds and fat. The most attractive plans seem to embrace the concepts of "quick" and "easy". Dieting has become a national pastime, with an estimated 50% of our population claiming to be "on a diet". Deprivation is not a recipe for lasting change, which is what most people want. With possible exceptions of fashion models and wrestlers, "dieters" desire to maintain a weight and state of fitness once it's attained. Replace the word "diet" and its popular definition with "lifestyle improvements and priorities", and you have a foundation for healthy and lasting improvement.

To quickly "weed out" the diets you don't want to experience, ask:

1. Does it include a variety of foods needed for good health and teach sound, rational eating habits?
2. Does it provide guidelines similar to the "MyPyramid" guide?

3. Does it avoid making dramatic claims for fast and easy weight loss and speak to the need to form new, lifetime habits?
4. Does it include some of your favorite foods that can be purchased at a grocery store near you?
5. Do you think you could enjoy most of these foods for your entire life?
6. Does it include most foods that will fit your budget and lifestyle?

Negative Aspects of Fad Diets

Unfortunately, fad diets rarely help people to achieve long-term weight loss. Temporary weight loss may be achieved, but the very restrictive nature of these weight loss plans often leads to rapid weight gain after the diet is stopped. This cycle of “yo-yo” dieting can lead to unhealthy eating patterns and successive weight gain that is greater than the initial weight lost. Failure is a common feeling after a failed diet attempt; however, the diet, not the dieter, is generally to blame. To achieve weight loss success, long-term life changes must be made.

Where Can I Get Credible Information?

A registered dietitian (R.D.) and/or licensed dietitian (L.D.) is your best nutrition resource for credible information. UNT's Health and Wellness Center has a dietitian who is available for counseling. For more information about weight loss, see the UNT dining services pamphlet entitled “So, How Do I Lose Weight?”

Some reliable information can also be found on the internet. The UNT Dining Services website (<http://dining.unt.edu/nutrition>), The American Dietetic Association (www.eatright.org) and MyPyramid (www.mypyramid.gov) are all good examples. Be aware that the internet holds far more poor sources of nutrition information than good. Research the institution and author that is publishing the information before deciding to trust what you are reading.

Diet Myths Explained

(Adapted from the Weight-control Information Network's *Weight-loss and Nutrition Myths: How Much Do You Really Know?*)

Myth: Fad diets work for permanent weight loss.

Fact: Fad diets are not the best way to lose weight and keep it off. Fad diets often promise quick weight loss or tell you to cut certain foods out of your diet. You may lose weight at first on one of these diets. But diets that strictly limit calories or food choices are hard to follow. Most people quickly get tired of them and regain any lost weight.

Fad diets may be unhealthy because they may not provide all of the nutrients your body needs. Also, losing weight at a very rapid rate (more than 3 pounds a week after the first couple of weeks) may increase your risk for developing gallstones (clusters of solid material in the gallbladder that can be painful). Diets that provide less than 800 calories per day also could result in heart rhythm abnormalities, which can be fatal.

Myth: High-protein/low-carbohydrate diets are a healthy way to lose weight.

Fact: The long-term health effects of a high-protein/low-carbohydrate diet are unknown, but getting most of your daily calories from high-protein foods like meat, eggs, and cheese is not a balanced eating plan. You may be eating too much fat and cholesterol, which may raise heart disease risk. You may be eating too few fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, which may lead to constipation due to a lack of dietary fiber. Following a high-protein/low-carbohydrate diet may also make you feel nauseous, tired, and weak. When

the body does not get enough carbohydrates it produces ketones, which act as an alternate energy source for the brain. Ketones are “bad brain food” because they are not the body’s preferred energy source.

Myth: Certain foods, like grapefruit, celery, or cabbage soup, can burn fat and make you lose weight.

Fact: No foods can burn fat. Some foods with caffeine may speed up your metabolism (the way your body uses energy or calories) for a short time, but they do not cause weight loss.

Myth: Natural or herbal weight-loss products are safe and effective.

Fact: A weight-loss product that claims to be “natural” or “herbal” is not necessarily safe. These products are not usually scientifically tested to prove that they are safe or that they work. For example, herbal products containing ephedra (now banned by the U.S. Government) have caused serious health problems and even death. Newer products that claim to be ephedra-free are not necessarily danger-free, because they may contain ingredients similar to ephedra.

Myth: “I can lose weight while eating whatever I want.”

Fact: To lose weight, you need to use more calories than you eat. It is possible to eat any kind of food you want and lose weight. Most importantly, you need to limit the number of calories you eat every day and/or increase your daily physical activity. Portion control is the key. Try eating smaller amounts of food and choosing foods that are lower in calories.

Myth: Skipping meals is a good way to lose weight.

Fact: Studies show that people who skip breakfast and eat fewer times during the day tend to be heavier than people who eat a healthy breakfast and eat four or five times a day. This may be because people who skip meals tend to feel hungrier later on, and eat more than they normally would. It may also be that eating many small meals throughout the day helps people control their appetites. Plus, keep in mind that if you cut too many calories you may cause your body’s metabolism to slow down, which can make weight loss more difficult. When your calorie intake is decreased drastically, your body’s natural response is to conserve the calories it receives by slowing metabolism.

Myth: Eating after 8 p.m. causes weight gain.

Fact: It does not matter what time of day you eat. It is what and how much you eat and how much physical activity you have during the whole day that determines whether you gain, lose, or maintain weight. No matter when you eat, your body will store extra calories as fat.

Additional Reading & Resources

<http://www.eatright.org>

<http://www.webmd.com/diet/evaluate-latest-diets>

http://www.medicinenet.com/diet_plans_and_programs/article.htm

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/spotquack.html>

<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/myths.htm>

Stahl P. Status report on nutrition in the news. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 200; 100:1298-99.