

## Diets That Work

Every few years people discover that those who need to lose weight can if they consistently eat fewer calories. This is another of those years. Science has again confirmed what most of us really know – That formulaic diets based on high this food or low that food don't work for long-term weight loss. That's not to say that people don't lose weight. They do lose a few or even a bunch of pounds over the short term. But people fall off the dietary prescription wagon after a few months, as most non-delusional dieters will admit and too-numerous-to-count studies have shown. Every study of every diet documents initial success, followed by gradual (or not so gradual) weight gain over one to two years.

That makes even more money for the weight loss gurus, since intermittent reinforcement is the strongest type. It worked once, it should work again... right? Both the dieter and the program blame the dieter for failure, propelling the poor sucker back to the program's welcoming arms.

When diets work they do so because they constrain caloric intake in some way. They do this either by 1) limiting portions of most food groups or 2) eliminating one or more whole food groups. Having to measure and limit all food portions to pre-defined amounts works, but is cumbersome, hard to sustain, and boggles the mind in restaurants. The pre-eminent prototype, Weight Watchers, is one of the most successful and enduring weight loss programs. It works, as long as it is followed.

The more popular diet plans that eliminate food groups range from eating "no fat," to "no carb," to foods good for your blood type, to only raw food, to only Garden of Eden food, to you name it. Those simple-minded approaches work for a while, but are hard to keep up for very long in a food-glutted society with peer-pressure to eat birthday cake. Some recent studies debunk the myth that such imbalances are necessary.

A large multi-center, two-year study published in the 2/26/09 New England Journal of Medicine compared dietary patterns. Obese people ate diets of 15% or 25% protein, 20% or 40% fat, and 65% or 35% carbohydrate. All had to count and restrict calories. Despite all the hoopla over the low-carb vs. low fat debate, people who succeeded in reducing calories lost weight.

Each diet group lost, on average, 8.8 pounds. Only 80% of the dieters completed the study and only 15% lost 10% or more of starting weight. A similar study last year reached the same conclusion. Simply cutting portions and total calories, regardless of which type, is necessary and sufficient to lost weight.

We can stop doing studies that prove that people are lucky to keep off a mere 10 pounds after two years. We know that survival mechanisms and hunger hormones compensate for calorie deprivation, increasing appetite and altering metabolism. The human organism just doesn't want to starve to death, somehow missing the fact that a 300 pound body remains after an 80 pound loss.

In the February study, behavioral factors, such as attending dietary counseling sessions predicted weight loss better than any specific plan. Other studies in which the people on the special food plan get intense counseling that the

control group does not almost always “prove” that the special diet works better. What they really prove is that any diet, when encouraged with enthusiasm and persistence enough that the dieter buys into it, can be effective.

So what diet does work? One that limits calories in a way that a person actually sticks with day after day. **Most people who maintain at least 10% weight loss over more than a year do it with a diet of their own design.** They don't cut out every favorite food, but they stay aware of what they eat, without calories-that-don't-count delusions and excuses. Those who keep it off for life don't return to old habits after reaching their goal weight or tiring of restrictions. They change a little here and there to keep it interesting.

They may roll snippets of multiple diets into a one. Anyone who has ever received any dietary advice has some idea of a healthy diet. But few can translate that knowledge into behavior because it doesn't fit their lifestyle. Most don't need to change their entire diet – just the foods that get them into trouble. The rotund usually know their own downfall: A daily six-pack of Pepsi, donuts at the office, dinner that lasts on into the night, chips, clinging at age 50 to meals that fueled football practice in a past life, nervous snacking, ice cream binges, pretending that every restaurant meal is a special occasion to suspend prudence, whatever...

All they have to do is limit total calories in a way they can sustain, with enough variety to prevent malnutrition. Ideally it accommodates the individual's lifestyle, cultural preferences, food weaknesses and metabolism. Since we know little about the genetics of weight and appetite, we can't predict which foods stem an individual's appetite best. Until we know more, people must discover how to satisfy stomach hunger (not emotional appetite) on their own. (For example, cereal in the morning leaves many people hungry an hour later, but peanut butter on toast does not).

Which is the “best” food pattern? One with enough calories to maintain ideal body weight and with variety from all the food groups to promote health. Nutrition scientists now focus on a “prudent” diet of whole grains, vegetables, lean meat, fish and poultry, moderate fat, dairy and fruit. Or the Mediterranean diet, basically Italian-style “prudent”. Either one minimizes heart disease, diabetes and cancer, but too many of these “good” calories won't allow weight loss. People who try to lose weight without success tend to better health than those who never try. Could eating more vegetables or exercising now and then impact aspects of health more important than weight?

To successfully diet, cut calories with no excuses, no week-long birthday parties, no unconscious hand-to-mouth habits. Drink water and eat vegetables. Avoid your particular disasters. The kicker is finding the key to get one's own brain to commit to that process ... forever.

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