

A Primer on Fad Diets

*The “flavor of the month” seems to be the way fad diets come and go (and sometimes return again under a new and improved name) to the American market. The wide variety, all the trendy names, and the continual “makeovers” they undergo make it nearly impossible to keep up with all the fad diets out there at any given time. Suffice it to say, that at any time **half of America is dieting** to lose weight – and many are willing to try anything that promises quick and painless weight loss. While every fad diet may be different in specifics, there are certain similar features that can help individuals learn to identify them and become an official Fad Diet Detective.*

The Truth – Like It or Not, but Why Not Learn to *Like It*?

Let’s face it, most of us think we’d like to eat as much as we want, anytime we want and still maintain a perfectly toned, perfectly nourished physique – yes, like we’re led to believe by magazine advertisements, on the television, and on the big screen. It’s certainly not “new” news, but like the way children who selectively block out things that they don’t want to hear from their parents, as adults we don’t want to hear – and refuse to believe – that our overindulgent diets and sedentary lifestyles actually *do have an impact* on our weight and overall body shape.

Unfortunately, there is no quick fix or method – short of painful and invasive surgery – to resize the body overnight. The fact is that the way to lose weight is utterly logical and much less “sexy” than the wide variety of fad diets that not only promise weight loss, but also a glamorous new life, unthinkable success and a whole new you. You’ve heard it before, but the equation for losing pounds is simple: *calories in* need to be less than *calories out*. But understanding this fact isn’t all: weight loss and successful weight maintenance requires a combination approach including diet, exercise, and behavioral modification strategies.

The Daily Diet – When Diet Means Eating

Everyone seems to be on a diet today! This sounds familiar by the way that Americans have come to understand dieting. The word “diet” has undergone a type of transformation over the years, attaining a level of notoriety and new meaning in American society. In fact, the media reports that half of Americans are on a “diet” today – implying that people are trying to lose weight by any number of methods. And the word “diet” musters up images of cutting calories, depriving oneself, and often-radically changing eating and exercise habits on a temporary basis until the pounds are lost.

But the truth is that *everyone is on a diet*. A diet is a way of eating; it’s the habitual consumption of food and drink or *pattern of eating* food from one day to the next – regardless of the number of calories, fat grams, or ratio of carbohydrate-to-protein. Of course, that’s not to say that some *kinds* of diets may be healthier than the next, but it is important to realize that an individual is

technically “on a diet” for her entire life, day in and day out. Understanding the multiple dimensions of the term can help us adjust to the idea that a *diet*, and therefore any dietary choices, is actually a lifetime commitment – fundamentally different than a quick fix, which is usually unsuccessful anyway.

A Weight Loss Diet

A diet specifically aimed at promoting weight loss requires a modification of the diet. Generally, in order to lose weight, a person has to reduce the calories eaten in the diet or burn more calories than usual through physical activity – or a combination of both. There are many, many diets on the market – some healthy, some that are questionable, and still others that are downright dangerous. Dr. John McDougall, author the McDougall Program, refers to three general categories of weight-loss diets: 1. the “starve your fat away,” eat less plans; 2. the “burn your fat away” plans by altering the nutrient balance and fuel use in the body, and; 3. the “eat your fat away,” high food and high nutrient, low calorie plans. These are helpful, loose categories that capture many of the general goals of the range of weight loss diets – both healthy and controversial.

Advocates of the “eat less” diets generally focus on calorie-restriction and balancing intake of calories against expenditure of calories from normal metabolism and through exercise. These diets may include healthy, low-fat foods or may be more controversial requiring sometimes-extreme restriction of certain nutrients. Long-term calorie restriction definitely will produce weight loss, but may be uncomfortable or difficult to follow depending on the overall plan.

The many “burn your fat away” diets that are popular today mostly focus on increasing protein and restricting carbohydrates (our primary fuel for energy) to promote the conversion of fats and protein to energy, thereby “burning fat.” These diets are generally low in calories also and can work, but at a hidden cost. Replacing carbohydrates (which are naturally low in fat and high in nutrients and fiber) with high amounts of protein and fat, which also increases cholesterol intake, can potentially increase the risk of heart disease, cancer, and osteoporosis over the long-term. Therefore, these diets are either not intended as a way of life (the first key that it may be a fad diet) or suggest that the short-term benefit (weight loss) is more desirable than the long-term cost (increased risk of chronic diseases). However, one might naturally wonder what’s the use of being thin now, if you’re increasing your risk of severe health consequences or premature death later?

The third broad category of diets are the high food, low calorie diets that can be healthy and promote weight-loss if they’re geared toward a diet rich in carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables, low-fat sources of protein and adequate overall nutrition. Examples of such programs, that have been gaining increased attention and scientific evidence over the past several decades, include the McDougall Program, the Dr. Dean Ornish’s Program, the Pritikin Diet and the Kempner Program/Kempner Rice Diet. These diets focus primarily on a diet that

is largely plant-based, but vary in regard to whether meat or dairy are recommended and in some of the specific recommendations for protein, fat, and carbohydrate intake.

Becoming a Fad Diet Detective

A fad is literally a practice or interest followed for a period of time with *exaggerated enthusiasm* – or a temporary craze. A fad comes and a fad goes as evidenced by the ever-changing fashions and celebrities of the day. Fad diets are no different. Like other fads, some fad diets come and go forever, and some just keep coming back every so often with a new twist or jazzed-up appearance.

By equipping yourself with some helpful tools and a list of questions to ask, you can become a Fad Diet Detective, capable of weeding through the volumes of diet programs out there and deciphering fad from fact. Fad diet books generally have certain elements in common. Typically, their authors will claim to have discovered a revolutionary new idea that will change the way we think about eating forever. They may use “extreme” language: that there are absolute right and wrong ways to eat, that there are good and evil foods or nutrients, and that weight problems are caused by one single factor, nutrient, misunderstanding, or practice, which incredibly applies to *all* people. All you have to do is look around to see that people come in all shapes, sizes, and with their own unique health histories to know that no one “diet” program can possibly fit everyone’s needs.

Many fad diets emphasize a single nutrient to the exclusion of all others, or promote *combinations* of foods that somehow maximize some metabolic potential in the body. Some will “guarantee” results – a sure sign of a fad – and others will fail to ever mention the long-term practice or effects of such a diet. Without being scientifically-oriented in nature, it may be challenging to determine if the rationale behind certain chemical explanations holds up, but very often, fad diets will be based – and explained – on faulty or downright misleading principles of how the body works. Finally, diet books that rely almost exclusively on anecdotal stories of individuals for evidence is generally a good sign that you may be onto something more “faddish,” than factual.

You know it’s a fad diet if. . .

Sounds like the beginning of a stand-up routine, but here’s a few more points to key you into the fact that a diet you’re considering may be more fantasy than fact.

1. Cost. If the diet is extremely costly to follow, requiring the purchase of specially labeled foods or supplements, it may be a fad diet.
2. Ongoing Financial Commitment. Does the diet program require you to purchase (and continue to purchase) lots of different products from supplements to cooking tools and other gadgets? Does it seem like you’ll be “eating” more supplements than food? If so, it may be a fad diet.

3. Focus on one nutrient or food over all others. If the program focuses on a single nutrient (like protein) or a specific food (like grapefruit) to the exclusion of all others, it may be a fad diet.
4. Authorship. What is the background of the author promoting the diet? Does he or she have any credible expertise or published research in the field of nutrition? If the author has certifications you've never heard of or is an "expert" based simply on his or her personal experience, it may be a fad diet.
5. References. Does the book have references at the end? You don't have to be a research scientist to glance at the end of a diet book and see: a. if there are any references at all (you'd be surprised how many books with "proven" diets fail to offer any so-called "proof" whatsoever), and; b. if there are references, glance at the names and the dates. Do they look like scientific resources or popular magazines? Is one author cited again and again? Are the publication dates fairly current or from a decade or more ago? If there are poor or really out-of-date references, it may be a fad diet.
6. Food Heroes and Villains. Does the author continually beat up on certain foods and nutrients as if they are villains? Are there clearly defined "good" foods and "bad" foods? Do you have to completely give up any particular foods forever? If you can answer yes to any of these questions, it may be a fad diet.
7. Promises and Guarantees. Does the diet promise you'll lose up to 10 pounds in two days, increase your metabolism while you sleep, or that anyone who tries it will be successful? If so, it may be a fad diet.
8. Does it Sound Safe? Simple as this may seem, many people forget to consider whether it sounds like a safe way to eat. Does the program go against anything you've learned or been told by a trusted health care provider in the past? If it does, it may be a fad diet.
9. Low-Calorie Diet with a Designer Name. Is the diet program really just a low-calorie diet with a fancy name? This can be okay in principle if it also focuses on a healthy, nutrient-rich, balanced diet. However, it can also be misleading. A weight-reducing diet should not go below 1,200 calories without medical supervision. Any diet that is low-enough in calories will lead to weight loss if intake is less than expenditure. Ask yourself if this diet seems like a healthy and moderate, low-calorie diet that will be comfortable to follow. If not, it may be a fad diet.
10. Anecdotes and Stories. Personal stories can lend interesting ideas and support for a weight loss plan *if* there is also other legitimate scientific evidence for the program. However, if the program relies exclusively on personal experience or anecdotes from a handful of cases, it may be a fad diet. (It's absolutely incredible how many times you'll read that "Jane" or "Joe" – despite all odds and having failed on every other "fad" diet on the market – succeeded with this particular one!)
11. Short-term or Lifetime Commitment Required. Does the diet suggest you can follow the plan for maybe 8 to 10 weeks, and then *return to your*

normal way of life? If so, it may be a fad diet. A true, health-promoting weight-loss diet is one that also requires a lifetime commitment to healthy eating and provides a maintenance plan.

12. And Finally. . .Common sense. Does the diet program seem plausible? Could a person follow a pattern of eating like this forever? Does it seem appealing now or over the long term? Does it seem healthy? Do you really believe the claims the author makes (“eat as much as you want and still lose weight!”)? If it goes against common sense, it may be a fad diet. Astounding as it may be considering how nonsensical some of the claims sound when we really think about them, we still continue to buy into this powerful marketing.

Fad Diets - Imposters for the Real Thing

The only truly legitimate and proven weight loss diet that’s really “on the market” is the combined approach of foods you select when you’re *at the market*. It involves learning to read labels and make selections that you *like* and that have nutrients to fuel your body.

Often when we finally let go of the concept that there’s a particular “diet” out there – yet to be discovered – to solve our problems for us, we can take action and address our weight issues realistically. When we actually step back and look at the variety of fad diet books on our personal bookshelves and in the bookstore, we can see how they play into our emotions and psychological beliefs about what food means. In our society, food is more than just fuel for the body, closely tied to our social lives, our emotions, our cultural heritage, history and traditions. These certainly do not need to be abandoned in order to lose weight – or even maintain a healthy weight – but they do need to become somewhat disentangled from the reasoning that puts up barriers to change.

The National Weight Loss Registry – The Proof is in the (Low-fat) Pudding

The National Weight Loss Registry follows “successful losers” – or individuals who have lost an average of 13 kg (about 30 pounds) and maintained their losses for over 5 years. In a recent survey, the Registry determined that the majority of its thousands of members have done so by continuing a low-fat, high carbohydrate diet in conjunction with regular exercise. Fad diets continually attempt to disprove the tried-and-true principle of a balanced and varied high carbohydrate, low fat, and nutrient-dense diet, but have overwhelmingly failed in their efforts – even if they have succeeded at dipping into our wallets. When considering any new dietary program, judge it against the USDA Food Guide Pyramid, be skeptical, ask questions, and always seek medical clearance before undertaking any major shift in your dietary pattern.

Not all diet books and diets are fad diets – there are many valuable tools and resources that can help you lose weight safely and healthfully. And there are a variety of *diets* in the true sense of the word that can be nutritionally adequate

and tasty depending on each individual's preferences. A vegetarian diet or a diet that includes meat can both be healthy or unhealthy, depending on how the diet is followed. So can a diet that includes real ice cream or French fries . . .once in a while. Remember a healthy dose of skepticism balanced by a large amount of optimism can make you an effective Fad Diet Detective *and* a "successful loser."

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