

Food Fact Sheet: Fad diets

Many of us would like to lose a few pounds. However you shouldn't be tempted by the ever increasing range of 'quick fix' and 'miracle' options making unrealistic weight loss promises for minimum effort.

Sadly, there is no magic solution to losing weight and keeping it off long-term. There is no wonder-diet you can follow without some associated nutritional or health risk and most are offering a short-term fix to a longterm problem.

What is a fad diet?

A fad diet is the kind of plan where you eat a very restrictive diet with few foods or an unusual combination of foods for a short period of time and often lose weight very quickly. However, most people then get fed-up with the restrictions, start eating more, choose less healthy foods and pile the pounds back on.

How to spot bad dietary advice

It can be useful to be aware of misleading weight loss claims so you don't end up wasting your time, effort and money and even risk your health. How can you tell dieting fact from fiction? Stay away from diets that:

- promise a magic bullet, ingredient or product to solve your weight problem without having to change your lifestyle in any way
- promise rapid weight loss of more than 2lbs of body fat a week
- recommend magical fat-burning effects of foods (such as the grapefruit diet) or hidden ingredients in foods (the coffee diet)
- promote the avoidance or severe limitation of a whole food group, such as dairy products or a staple food such as wheat without any medical reason to do so (and suggests substituting them for expensive alternatives, special products or large doses of vitamin and mineral supplements)
- promote eating mainly one type of food (e.g. cabbage soup, chocolate or eggs) or avoiding all cooked foods (the raw food diet)
- recommend eating foods only in particular combinations based on your genetics or blood type
- suggest being overweight is related to a food allergy or a yeast infection
- recommend 'detoxing' or avoiding foods in certain combinations such as fruit with meals
- offer no supporting evidence apart from a celebrity with a personal success story
- are based on claims that we can survive without food or having liquid meals only
- focus only on your appearance rather than on health benefits
- are selling you products or supplements
- recommend eating non-food items such as cotton wool
- make recommendations based on a single study
- recommend the same diet for everyone without accounting for specific needs
- based on a 'secret' that doctors are yet to discover

Remember, if it sounds too good to be true – it probably is!

Who knows what?

Don't be fooled by the fact that beautiful celebrities are allegedly following some of these weird and bizarre regimens.

They can often afford to have personal trainers, beauticians, stylists and chefs and their photos are almost always 'airbrushed' to give you the impression of a perfect body that doesn't exist in reality. Many people claim to be experts in nutrition yet have limited knowledge and offer no protection to the public.

You should be wary of unqualified practitioners who may be offering unproven techniques to diagnose and treat nutritional problems.

Be suspicious of the following:

- iridology
- kinesiology
- craniosacral therapy
- hair mineral analysis
- face reading
- tongue reading
- colonic irrigation
- magnetic therapy

Ask your doctor for advice or to refer you to a dietitian - you can also refer yourself. Dietitians have recognised qualifications, are regulated, will be able to guide you through the maze of dietary information that bombards us and give you safe, unbiased, evidence-based advice.

Basic guidelines

So what's the best advice for getting rid of the extra pounds and keeping them off? It may be obvious, but to lose weight you need to make healthier choices, eat a nutritionally balanced and varied diet with appropriately sized portions, and be physically active.

Here are a few ideas to get you going and help you out of the fad diet cycle:

- keep a diary and stay more aware of habits and problem areas
- have regular meals, starting with breakfast, and include protein at each meal
- choose lower fat foods, eg lean meat and lower fat dairy products
- fill up on vegetables and fruit at meals and choose as snacks and for desserts
- watch your portion sizes
- get active, aim for at least 30 minutes daily of moderate activity. If you can manage more than that even better - ideally aim to build up to 60 minutes a day
- be realistic about weight loss; aim to lose 1-2lbs (0.5-1kg) a week. See your GP before attempting any weight loss programme especially if you have existing medical conditions.

Summary

Fad-diets can be tempting as they offer a quick-fix to a long-term problem. However, they can risk your health and you should only follow advice from a doctor or dietitian.

The best way to lose weight and keep it off is to make healthier choices, eat a nutritionally balanced and varied diet with appropriately sized portions, and be physically active.