
Weight loss and fad diets

These days it's hard to open a magazine without reading about the next miracle weight loss program. But if these diets are so effective, why are there so many new ones?

Lose weight the right way

You may be looking for a fast way to lose weight and there's no shortage of 'fad diets' around. These 'diets' may provide short-term results, but they are difficult to sustain and, ultimately, they deprive you of the essential nutrients that only balanced eating can offer.

It's easy to spot a fad diet

Typically, a fad diet shares some, or all, of the following characteristics:

- Promises a quick fix
- Promotes 'magic' foods or combinations of foods
- Implies that food can change body chemistry
- Excludes or severely restricts food groups or nutrients, such as carbohydrates
- Has rigid rules that focus on weight loss
- Makes claims based on a single study or testimonials only.

Sometimes you need a special diet

Of course, some medical conditions do require special eating plans. In these instances, any recommendations from your doctor should be followed.

Fad diets can cause health problems

Because they often cut out key foods, fad diets may cause the following symptoms:

- Dehydration
- Weakness and fatigue
- Nausea and headaches
- Constipation
- Inadequate vitamin and mineral intake.

Fad diets that severely restrict food groups or nutrients may also mean that you miss out on the protective health effects that a balanced eating plan provides. We don't know whether fad diets are safe over the longer term, or whether they lead to an increased risk of various diseases.

The answer is a balanced eating plan

Don't worry. There is an eating plan that gets results. You can achieve and maintain a healthy body weight and you don't have to cut out any foods because you can eat everything – in moderation.

It's called a balanced eating plan and it's nothing new. Combined with moderate physical activity, it will change your life.

With a balanced eating plan, it's what you leave in that makes all the difference. For a balanced eating plan to be successful, you need to:

- Eat plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruits.
- Include a variety of cereals (including breads, rice, pasta and noodles), preferably wholegrain.
- Include lean meat, fish, poultry or alternatives.
- Include milk, yoghurts, cheeses or alternatives.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Limit saturated fat and moderate total fat intake.
- Choose reduced fat varieties of foods where possible.
- Choose foods low in salt.
- Limit your alcohol intake, if you choose to drink.
- Consume only moderate amounts of sugars, and food and drinks containing added sugars. In particular, limit sugar-sweetened beverages.

Meeting your body's needs

A stable body weight means that the amount of kilojoules from food matches the kilojoules used by your body. If your weight is increasing, this may mean that you are eating too much food, doing too little physical activity or both.

Different food components contain different levels of kilojoules:

- Fat is the most concentrated – it contains 37kJ/g (kilojoules per gram).
- Protein contains 17kJ/g.
- Carbohydrates have 16kJ/g.
- Alcohol has 29kJ/g.

Carbohydrates are your body's fuel

Carbohydrates provide the body with kilojoules, or fuel. Foods that contain the most carbohydrates include:

- Fruit
- Vegetables, especially potatoes and corn
- Legumes, including dried beans, peas and lentils
- Grains
- Bread
- Breakfast cereal
- Rice, pasta and noodles
- Low-fat milk and yoghurt.

These foods are rich in vitamins and minerals and are generally low in fat. This makes them well suited to a healthy eating plan. Some are excellent sources of dietary fibre, including wholegrain varieties, legumes, fruit and vegetables.

Foods with lots of added sugar (like soft drinks and sweets) are another source of carbohydrates, but these contribute extra kilojoules with few vitamins and minerals.

Protein helps your body build new cells

Protein is an essential nutrient that you need throughout life. Your body needs it to make, maintain and renew all its tissue and cells. Protein can be found in animal and plant-based foods:

- **Animal protein** – protein-containing foods from animals are meat, chicken, fish, eggs and dairy products.
- **Vegetable protein** – protein-containing foods from plants include tofu, nuts, seeds, lentils, dried beans and peas, and soy milk.

Fat helps your body absorb nutrients

You need to eat some fat. It's important for many body processes. Fat protects your organs, keeps you warm and helps your body absorb and move nutrients around. It also helps hormone production.

It is important to choose foods with the healthiest type of fat. Many Australians eat more fat than they need, which can lead to weight gain and heart disease.

The healthier fats are unsaturated fats. They can be found in sunflower oil, safflower oil, peanut and olive oils, poly- and mono-unsaturated margarine spreads, nuts, seeds and avocado. These are much better for you than the saturated fat found in butter, cream, fatty meats, sausages, biscuits, cakes and fried foods.

Be active every day

Once you have a healthy eating pattern, you'll soon feel like you have more energy and you'll want to be more active. To make it easier for you to get the right amount of physical activity each day, here are a few suggestions:

- Think of movement as an opportunity, not an inconvenience.
- Put together at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days.
- Enjoy some regular, vigorous exercise if you can for extra health and fitness.
- Remember, the more activity you do, the greater the benefits you'll enjoy.

A healthy lifestyle is easier than you think

Changing your eating and physical activity habits can be difficult at first. But once you've started, it's easy to sustain. Here are a few tips to help ease the transition:

- Combine an active lifestyle with healthy eating.
- Make small, achievable, lifelong changes to your lifestyle and eating habits.
- Fill up on low-kilojoule nutritious foods.
- Keep portions moderate in size.
- Eat until you have had enough – not until you are full.
- Do your best to avoid eating when you are not hungry.
- Recognise that on some days you might be hungrier than on other days.
- Eat slowly and enjoy your food.
- Eat regular meals including breakfast, lunch and dinner.
- Reduce the amount of 'extra' or 'sometimes' foods that you eat.

Examples of 'sometimes' foods include biscuits, cakes, desserts, pastries, soft drinks and high fat snack items such as crisps, pies, pasties, sausage rolls, other takeaway foods, lollies and chocolate.

Feel good about yourself

Being healthy includes feeling good about yourself. Don't accept the unrealistic images portrayed in the media. At times, there are pressures on top of work and family, which make it harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Adopting balanced eating habits can help you feel better about yourself.

Fad dieting is one pressure you don't need in your life. Healthy food and physical activity will give you more energy and leave you feeling healthier. You will also be able to set a good example for your children and look after your family by offering them healthy food.

Once a wide range of nutritious foods and physical activity become part of your everyday routine, the idea of dieting will start to seem strange.

Where to get help

- Your local doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942

Things to remember

- Fad dieting is one pressure you don't need in your life.

- It's not difficult to change your lifestyle to help you maintain a healthy weight.
- A healthy eating plan will help you feel better and give you more energy.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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