

The Dieting Dilemma

Health Experts Say Losing Pounds Is More About Sustainability And Avoiding Trendy Diet Plans

MT IN DEPTH

By Amanda Collins

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Sept. 21, 2011 — You look at the scale in the bathroom and wince. It's like it's just staring at you, a constant reminder of those extra pounds that seem to have taken up permanent residence around your midsection.

But before you head to your local bookstore to pick up the latest fad diet book and get ready to give up all of your favorite foods, consider that diets actually aren't designed to help you achieve your goal weight...at least not for very long. In fact, that diet that promises you'll lose ten pounds in two weeks may actually pose long-term health problems.

It's all about sustainability, according to many health experts. Diets that restrict the foods you eat have no chance of being successful because you can't follow them forever. That piece of chocolate cake is just too tempting, and before you know it, you're riding on the up-and-down roller coaster of dieting, trying desperately to get off and just maintain a normal weight. And that crazy ride doesn't just affect your waistline; it can have a significant impact on your self-esteem as well.

"Limited diets are not sustainable. Even the people who successfully achieve their goal weight will return to old eating habits and gradually regain the weight," points out Katie Williams of HealthyNutritionExpert.com. In fact, many people who lose weight tend to gain back not only the pounds they lost but some extra as well.

Another big issue with restricted eating is the loss of vital nutritional components. For example, many diets ban or limit carbohydrates, but they are the fuel that runs the body and should be a significant component of any healthy lifestyle. "Taking certain foods out of your diet and following a super-low-calorie intake will work for some time, but what ultimately leads to diet failure is sustainability," says Betsy Haley, the health-eating expert at Sinai Hospital in Baltimore. "Think of the body as a machine. If you stop putting enough fuel in a machine, it will break down. When a body goes without enough fuel during a diet, it gets nervous, thinks it is starving, and conserves fat," adds Haley.

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture's has replaced the Food Pyramid with "My Plate."

It's that conservation of fat that inhibits weight loss and often results in what you're trying to avoid: weight gain.

It all goes back to metabolism. According to Ling Wong, nutrition and wellness coach with www.thoughts4foods.com, if calories are restricted, the body's metabolism decreases and it burns off fat more slowly. When you go back to eating normally, metabolism is still slow, causing the weight to stick. Metabolism changes can have an impact on thyroid function, potentially leading to hypothyroidism, warns Wong. And if you're able to lose the weight and take it too far, women can experience irregular menstrual cycles caused by low estrogen levels, which can also lead to osteoporosis.

If you're successful at losing pounds in the short term, the scale may not just represent a loss of fat.

"It's impossible to lose just fat in such a short amount of time. Fat burns fewer calories than muscle," says Jennifer Neily, MS, RD, consultant with Meals to Live.

And muscles need a balanced diet from protein and carbohydrates, which you might be limiting on a fad diet.

There may be some foods that are good to eliminate from your diet for good, says Tom Griesel, a Sun City resident and co-author of *TurboCharged: Accelerate Your Fat Burning Metabolism, Get Lean Fast and Leave Diet and Exercise Rules in the Dust*. He advocates removing refined foods and grains. Often, a healthy lifestyle does mean cutting out some of those foods that our culture now accepts as standard, such as fast food and overly processed products.

Truly, if long-term weight loss and health are your goals, you need to make a complete transformation. But that doesn't have to be laborious and overly challenging.

"Healthy eating doesn't have to mean 'radical' changes," says Johnell Borer McCauley, a Phoenix-based nutrition specialist and co-author of *Nutrition Unmasked*. Instead, she encourages education and gradually transforming your lifestyle to a more healthy approach.

Even the Center for Disease Control concurs, stating that, "The key to achieving and maintaining a healthy weight isn't about short-term dietary changes. It's about a lifestyle that includes healthy eating, regular physical activity, and balancing the number of calories you consume with the number of calories your body uses."

So get rid of those fad diet books and clear out the cayenne-infused lemon juice, fat-laden protein, pills, and potions you hoped would get you on the path to your skinny jeans. Instead, start reading labels and create a colorful diet full of vegetables, fruits, lean protein, and unrefined grains. And if you need a little slice of chocolate cake, it won't be such a big deal.

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