

The Truth About Fad Diets

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What are fad diets?

Since the early 1800s, fad diets have appeared in many forms, and there is no evidence that they are going out of style any time soon. Fad diets are defined as “diets intended to help a person lose a large amount of weight in a short period of time typically by reducing the amount of food consumed to minimal levels” [1]. Fad diets have several things in common, such as:

- A promise of rapid weight loss through what are usually unhealthy ways.
- Focused on one or two food groups and removing other food groups.
- Not supported scientific research.
- Tend to be diets that are meant to be followed for a short time period.
- Very low in calories.

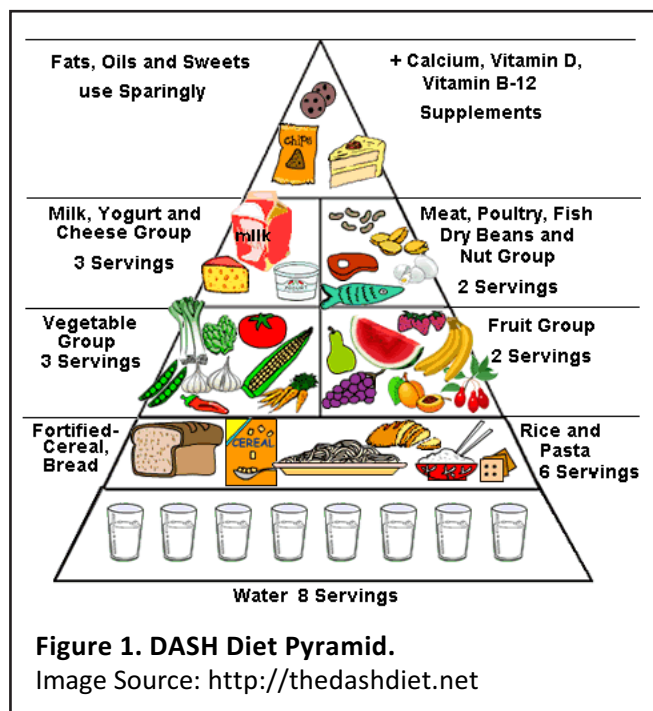
What is a healthy diet?

In contrast, healthy diets usually focus on whole foods, calories and portions for managing body weight; combine diet and exercise; contain all major food groups; have been scientifically studied; and, most importantly, teach lifetime strategies for maintaining a healthy weight.

Health, wellness and weight loss are important for millions of Americans, with new diets from experts and non-experts appearing every day. Below we describe the healthiest and least healthy diets [2].

The DASH Diet

The DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) aims to lower high blood pressure while also focusing on getting to a healthy weight by determining how many calories you need for your age and current weight. This diet has been shown in research to lower both good and bad cholesterol and decrease the risk of heart disease and stroke [3].



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The DASH Diet focuses on foods high in potassium, protein and fiber, such as whole grains, vegetables and fruit. It limits foods high in saturated fat (such as full fat dairy and fatty meats), refined sugar, red meat and alcohol and salt. Recommended protein sources are nonfat dairy products, lean cuts of poultry and fish, beans and legumes.

An example 2,000 calorie DASH diet would include 6 to 8 servings of whole grains, 4 to 5 servings of fruits and vegetables, 2 to 3 servings of fat free or low-fat dairy, up to 6 total ounces of lean meat, poultry and/or fish, 2 to 3 servings of fats and oils and 5 servings or less (per week) of sweets. DASH encourages a daily sodium intake of 1,500 milligrams. There are several online tools available for following the DASH diet that include thousands of recipes and tips.

Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean Diet is similar to the DASH diet in many ways. This diet focuses on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, legumes, olive oil and flavorful herbs and spices. Fish and seafood should be consumed at least twice a week, whereas poultry, eggs, cheese and yogurt should be eaten in moderation. Only on special occasions are sweets and red meats recommended. Red wine is allowed on occasion.

The Mediterranean Diet has been extensively studied in science. It has proven beneficial for weight loss and waist circumference in addition to longevity, heart disease and certain types of cancer [4]. To help



Figure 2. The Mediterranean Diet Food Pyramid.
Image Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediterranean_Diet_Pyramid

with weight control, the Mediterranean diet places a strong emphasis on physical activity. There are no specific guidelines for calories or serving sizes. Instead, individuals are encouraged to reduce the number of calories they eat every day if weight loss is a goal.

The benefits of the Mediterranean diet include a decreased risk of a number of chronic diseases such as cancer and cardiovascular disease and, in general, a longer life. People who support the Mediterranean diet also claim that any weight lost following this diet is likely to stay off for the long term.

Current Fad Diets

Ketogenic Diet

The Ketogenic Diet (also called keto diet) claims that weight loss becomes very easy once you enter a state of ketosis, which is when the body breaks down both fat from the diet and stored fat into substances called ketones. The body's fat-burning system switches from using carbohydrates to fat for energy. Ketosis has been shown to benefit the brain; as many as half of young people with epilepsy had fewer seizures after following the diet [5].

While similar in many ways to other low carbohydrate diets (such as the Atkins diet or the South Beach Diet), the keto diet is even more restrictive – only about 20 grams of net carbs per day are allowed. In addition to feeling fuller with fewer cravings, supporters of the diet also boast an increase in mood, mental focus and energy.

Fat-rich foods make up the majority (approximately 70 percent) of this diet. Protein is moderate, making up about a quarter of each meal. The small amount of carbohydrate in the diet comes from non-starchy vegetables such as leafy greens, broccoli, cauliflower and cucumbers. Oils like avocado, olive, canola, flaxseed and palm, as well as mayonnaise, will flavor salads while adding recommended fats. Protein choices are opposite of what is typically recommended for a healthy weight loss diet. Instead of lean meats, fattier selections are suggested. Think chicken or turkey with the skin, rib eye steaks, high fat fish such as salmon, pork shoulder, bacon and sausage.

Despite its current popularity, more research needs to be done to determine the long-term benefits and safety of following a ketogenic diet.

Whole30 Diet

While the Whole30 Diet program does not tout itself as a weight loss plan, the majority of its followers do shed unwanted pounds, most likely because

all traces of sugar, alcohol, grains, dairy and legumes are not allowed for 30 days. Followers of the plan are advised to reintroduce food groups individually and to look for a physical reaction in order to determine what foods should be eliminated or limited for the long term.

There is no calorie counting, weighing or measuring on this plan. The founders of the diet discourage this to raise participants' attention to the benefits of "real food" eating outside of weight loss. Meal ideas include egg and avocado sweet potato "toast" for breakfast; an array of fresh vegetable salads with meat or poultry and olive oil-based dressing for lunch; and roasted or grilled meat, fish or poultry with salad and vegetables for dinner. Snacks could be nuts or fruit, and desserts may be made with coconut milk, fruit and/or nuts.

An informal survey was done by the founders of the diet of 1,600 Whole30 participants. While 96 percent of dieters lost between 6 and 15 pounds [6], experts worry that restrictive diets with no room for error can set followers up for failure. The diet's freedom to eat without counting calories might cause some followers to go overboard, since research shows that tracking what you eat and weighing yourself regularly are two of the most effective strategies for weight loss. Other studies show mixed results on low-carb and restrictive diets [7].

What type of diet should you follow?

So, what should you do with so much information in the public eye to sift through if you want to lose weight or change your lifestyle? The first step is to establish a set goal. Is it weight loss? Lowering high cholesterol or blood pressure? Just simply wanting to eat healthier? From there, begin by doing research. If you are following a specific diet, it should be supported by science; social media, blogs and magazines are not always reliable. There are professional organizations such as the American Diabetes Association, the American Heart Association and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics where you can often find helpful information about where to begin and which diet fits your lifestyle.

The majority of diets that stand the test of time are based on a foundation of whole foods, and they usually do not eliminate entire food groups. Some diets may emphasize higher amounts of protein, while others may support a more plant-based foundation. Finding an eating style that meets your nutritional and lifestyle goals is usually only half of the equation. Behavior modification including eating mindfully, learning how to prepare healthy meals at home as well as incorporating daily exercise are also important. The key is to be patient with yourself and experiment to find an eating and healthy lifestyle plan that is sustainable for the long run!

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