

# Ditch Diets and Discover Health

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## Learning objectives:

- To gain understanding about dieting trends
- To learn about current nutrition research
- To understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle

## Background data

Obesity experts are distancing themselves from traditional dieting. It has become clear that “diets” don’t work for most people. Health professionals have had limited success with long-term weight loss. In fact, obesity is on the rise in the United States. At the same time, consumer spending on weight loss products is at an all-time high.

Our society values thinness. Many persons worry about weight, as scientific surveys suggest. A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 40 percent of all U.S. adult women and 25 percent of adult men were trying to lose weight. Of these, 62 percent of the women and 44 percent of the men were not overweight.

Although we obsess about thinness, for some persons excess weight is a problem. Fourteen percent of all deaths in the United States are related to poor diets and/or sedentary lifestyles, and 23 percent of Americans are obese—more than 30 percent over their recommended weight. Improving Americans’ dietary habits would decrease deaths associated with chronic health conditions.

Conventional health education assumes that given enough information about the dangers of obesity, individuals will make a rational decision to avoid high-fat, high-calorie foods to maintain a healthy weight. This approach has not been successful for long-term weight loss. Educators rarely address the issue that individuals use food to cope with emotional issues and their environment.

The research points toward several established facts at this time:

- Weight lost by dieting usually is regained over a period of time.
- Data showing the beneficial effects of weight loss are limited.
- The impact weight loss has on longevity is unknown.
- Being overweight is correlated with coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and a variety of musculoskeletal problems.
- A high-fat diet and sedentary lifestyle can lead to the development of largely preventable chronic diseases, which can significantly decrease one’s quality of life.
- Both obesity and successful weight loss are related to many factors, including genetics, social support, culture, healthy foods access, exercise, and education.
- A long-term commitment to healthy eating habits and exercise will lead us on the right path to better health.

## Physiological factors

The message that thinness is good and achievable is a part of U.S. culture. Yet biological aspects of weight suggest a major conflict between cultural expectations and biological reality. Throughout the world, people have many different shapes and sizes. In part, this is nature’s way of helping people survive in their environment. For example, size influences retention of heat. In colder climates, people tend to be heavier for their height than those who live in warmer climates. Historically, climate appears to influence body shape more than diet does.

Research on children shows that humans can naturally regulate how much they eat. Kids given a variety of foods and the freedom to select what they like will keep their caloric intake consistent. Research also indicates that two people can eat the same amount of food with very different results in body weight.

### **The diet trap**

The body naturally dictates how much fat it should carry. Unfortunately, the body does not know the difference between a real famine and a self-imposed weight-loss famine. When fat stores get too low, metabolic rates decrease to save energy. Calories are burned more slowly, and weight loss may stop altogether. As calories are restricted, the person experiences hunger, nature's reminder to search for food. At this point, persons may become obsessed with food and resort to binge eating.

The tendency to overeat or binge may be a response to starvation from limiting food intake. Irritability, anxiety, depression, and other emotional reactions can result from the semi-starvation associated with dieting. Because the metabolic rate is already lowered, calories consumed are used at a lower, energy-saving rate. When the inevitable eating does take place, weight is gained more easily. The body tends to use this food energy to restore fat, even though muscle tissue may have been lost.

Most people who have lost weight will regain it within two to five years, and many will actually weigh more than they did before the weight loss. Despite the popularity of being thin, nature has its own idea about the weight range for each individual.

### **Traditional diets vs. the nondiet approach**

Most individuals do not fit the media's ideal body type. Neither is this body type usually a healthy one. Should we target our weight management toward a more realistic view of the human body?

Researchers report that dieting increases the likelihood of binge eating for both physical and psychological reasons. People who lose and regain weight (yo-yo dieting) have a greater risk of dying, particularly from heart disease, than those who maintain a stable weight. Failed attempts to lose weight often

bring negative psychological impacts—lower self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. Dieting may be a health hazard we should be trying to cure. Weight stability is more important than weight loss for most people.

Concern about the unreliable and damaging effects of dieting is leading to replacing dieting with conventional eating. The diet approach requires that we control food needs externally. This becomes a nightmare to maintain and works against our body. A nondiet approach means that we follow the natural cues of our body.

### **Intuitive eating**

A recent survey asked 500 nutrition counselors to list the top 10 reasons people overeat. Hunger was never mentioned as a reason.

The intuitive eating approach suggests that people become obese because they eat for nonphysical reasons. If an individual regularly eats for reasons besides hunger, this can lead to extra caloric consumption and weight gain. The purpose of mindful eating is to fully appreciate the satisfaction of eating and then identify when physical fullness has been reached. The goal is to eat for physical reasons to meet caloric needs as indicated by both hunger and fullness.

Another unique part of this approach is that people should eat exactly what they want to eat. The intuitive eating approach suggests that the body wants to eat healthy food, and once diet restrictions have been removed, persons will crave and eat mostly nutritious foods. Research is needed to determine if intuitive eaters have healthier diets than the general population and if the change to a naturally thin body is accurate.

A primary benefit of intuitive eating is that it may help compulsive eaters develop a more healthful relationship with food. Persons who are unable to maintain weight loss using the traditional starvation methods may find this approach liberating, empowering, and more realistic than other means of weight loss. If compulsive eaters can develop skills to identify feelings of physical hunger and satisfaction, they may consume fewer calories and reduce their body size.

A challenge to this approach is that people tend to love high-fat foods, a taste that may have evolved to help humans build fat stores

for famines. Even if you eat only when you are hungry, you're likely to eat too much fat, and fat is what makes most people fat! People always will have to face changing their habits.

While the intuitive eating approach may be good for some people, there is no evidence that the weight loss strategies are valid. Limitations to the approach are: (1) it promises thinness just as other "diets" do; (2) it does not ask consumers to rethink this goal, but it offers another way to the ideal body for a culture obsessed with thinness; (3) it fails to mention that certain foods eaten in large amounts over time and a sedentary lifestyle are harmful; and (4) it ignores all genetic, sociological, and environmental reasons for obesity.

The intuitive eating approach does contribute to understanding why some people are overweight, and it should be considered in gaining a holistic view of weight management. This intuitive approach may be most effective when combined with a traditional educational weight loss approach where facts are presented concerning the benefits of exercise, a low-fat diet, and body size acceptance.

Intuitive eating shares some similarities with the antidiating movement, but it is still a method of weight loss for those who want or need to lose weight.

### **Antidiating movement**

An alternative to promoting thinness as the goal of weight loss programs is the body acceptance/antidiating movement. Individuals should not become obsessed with losing weight but learn to eat healthy foods and make exercise a part of their daily lives. After following the antidiating approach, one person said, "It feels good to eat vegetables and to exercise. I'm not doing those things out of some sort of punishment to myself for being fat."

Normalizing the eating of chronic dieters is the common goal of antidiating programs. This means (1) adopting healthy and natural eating patterns; (2) eating as guided by body hunger and fullness signals; and (3) being free of negative attitudes about food. Normal eating can counter weight gain by regulating food intake in accordance with physical need. While this method may be helpful for some, the body

acceptance approach may not work for persons who cannot initially stick with eating lower fat foods or exercising.

Nine studies have evaluated antidiating programs. In eight of the studies, there were improvements in three aspects of eating behavior—resisting dieting, using physical cues to regulate eating, and stopping problem eating. Self-esteem and self-acceptance were increased, and symptoms of depression were reduced. Participation in the programs was associated with weight stability rather than weight change.

The advent of antidiating programs may be a lead for weight management. First, the approach is holistic in focus. It makes weight management part of an inclusive health quest. Second, the findings strongly show that antidiating programs can deliver positive eating styles and mental health outcomes. The challenge is to find ways to integrate antidiating principles with the "gold standard" weight management strategies of curbing fat consumption, lowering overall energy intake, and increasing physical activity.

### **High-protein, low-carbohydrate diets**

In addition to the problems of "yo-yo dieting," another concern is diets that severely limit one food group. Diets of this type do not meet dietary guidelines, and no long-term advantage in unbalanced diets has been found. One of the most popular of these diets is the high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet.

The advantage of the high-protein, low-carbohydrate approach is that diets that eliminate a whole group of nutrients, in this case carbohydrates, are lower in calories and do result in weight loss. Insulin needs drop, and blood glucose and sometimes even lipid levels improve. It works, at least temporarily. However, the lower energy intake accounts for the weight loss, and the claims to improve blood glucose and lipid levels are not supported by scientific evidence. High-protein diet books are based on personal experiences and theories; there is little peer-reviewed published research to support the diets.

What are other concerns? A major concern is that foods with proven health benefits are eliminated. There are health needs for the

nutrients found in grains, fruit, vegetables, milk, and other carbohydrate-containing food. These diets are seriously short of essential nutrients, such as vitamins C and D, folic acid, and especially calcium. The excess protein also can cause the body to lose what little calcium is ingested.

A typical day's menu for women from one of the popular high-protein diets contains 1,200 calories and less than half of the recommended amounts of the B vitamins, iron, magnesium, and copper. Taking a supplement to replace missing nutrients is not the complete solution, because all of the essential nutrients in foods have not yet been found and so cannot be replaced. These diets are also low in fiber, which can cause constipation.

We have gone through the high-carb approach, and it is unlikely that a high-fat approach will go far, so we are recycling the high-protein diet. The bottom line is that people gain weight not because they eat too many carbohydrates, but because they eat too many calories. Eating carbohydrates does not make people fat unless they overeat carbohydrates, just as when they overeat protein and fat. Moderation, eating a healthful diet, and being physically active continue to be the best approach.

### **Weight management: A multifaceted issue**

Being overweight is a complex condition consisting of biological, psychological, and social factors.

Most diets for reducing weight can lead to successful weight loss; however, body weight often is regained after overeating in response to limiting intake while dieting. Few individuals achieve permanent weight loss from existing approaches. Moderately successful, long-term weight control programs combine controlled amounts of healthful food intake and exercise, but often ignore psychological components. In addition, the hazards of dieting and weight cycling are of growing concern.

Programs tend to fail because they are not comprehensive and/or sensitive to the complicated forces behind behaviors. Future effective methods will need to be focused on research-based, holistic approaches that consider all factors.

### **Healthy choices and exercise make the difference**

We need the freedom to enjoy—without guilt—delicious foods. However, most of the time we need to be in the habit of making healthy meal and snack choices and choosing nutrient-dense foods over calorie-dense foods. Evidence is pointing toward a holistic direction for better health that includes the following: eating healthy low-fat foods, exercising regularly, trusting hunger signals, accepting body size, and developing a positive relationship with food. In the long term, this will help us achieve the weight that is best for us.

### **Exercise**

Many persons agree that one solution is to change the focus from weight loss to overall wellness. Of interest is research showing that physical fitness significantly lowers death rates, primarily because of the lower rates of cardiovascular disease and cancer in the high-fitness group.

About 30 percent of adults in the United States are sedentary, and low fitness levels are as prevalent. Most men and women can increase their fitness level and reduce mortality risk factors with moderate exercise (for example, walking briskly for 30 to 60 minutes daily). These dietary and exercise habits may result in modest weight loss for some people, but the primary benefit is better health.

### **Finding the truth**

With so much conflicting nutrition information, how do you find the truth? Many fad diets are all about MONEY, and the “diet” industry wants your dollars. This tends to confuse people about good nutrition. Reviews of diets in popular magazines have found that they seldom meet recommended nutrient guidelines. Inadequate diets may pose a health threat to chronic dieters. To avoid such adverse affects and promote healthful eating, diets should provide essential nutrients and reflect accepted dietary guidelines.

Use these guidelines to determine if the nutrition information is good and factual:

- ✓ cites credible references
- ✓ calls for an appropriate balance of carbohydrate, fat, and protein

- ✓ encourages and recommends exercise
- ✓ encourages eating a wide variety of foods
- ✓ recommends adequate calories
- ✓ follows the recommended dietary guidelines for sufficient nutrients
- ✓ makes sensible recommendations and no unbelievable claims
- ✓ does not limit a food or a food group

### Basic guidelines still hold true:

What may have been solid scientific knowledge 10 years ago is questioned today, and what we accept today may be wrong tomorrow. Nonetheless, despite the fact that much remains to be learned about nutrition and that mistaken past diet notions must be corrected, nutritionists in the United States have agreed to a remarkable degree on what to eat and not to eat to promote health and avoid disorders, such as coronary heart disease, cancer, hypertension, and obesity.

Based on current scientific knowledge and revised every five years, the USDA Dietary Guidelines “are designed to help Americans choose diets that will meet nutrient requirements, promote health, support active lives, and reduce chronic disease risks.” The following are the basic recommendations:

- Eat a variety of foods from each food group.
- Balance the food you eat with physical activity.
- Choose a diet with plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits.
- Choose a diet low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol.
- Choose a diet moderate in sugars.
- Choose a diet moderate in salt and sodium.
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.

Most people need to eat more fruits and vegetables to increase their intake of fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Emphasize foods from the bread, cereal, rice, and pasta group. Have moderate amounts from the milk and meat/bean group. Eat fats, oils, and sweets sparingly, which supply calories but little or no vitamins and minerals.

*The bottom line is that there are no quick fixes. The key is making a long-term commitment to healthy eating and exercise!*

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