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Why diets don't work for most people

By Michelle May M.D.

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If you are like most people, losing weight is at the top of your New Year's resolutions. But if you are like most people, you have a hard time sticking to a diet. We have all been bombarded with information about eating right and exercising so you already know the fundamental principle of weight loss: the number of calories you eat must be less than the number of calories you burn. But despite all of the information available on the countless ways to accomplish this, you and millions of others still battle your weight.

The diet "experts" may recommend counting calories, exchanges, points, grams, or ounces. The diet may require you to eat pre-packaged food or meal replacements. There may be strict meal plans or complicated food regimens to follow. Some methods even eliminate entire food groups—or solid food all together. Diets often tell you that there are forbidden foods or magical food combinations, and they often impose food rules that most people do not, cannot, or should not follow for very long. And of course, the rules are always changing!

Accurate statistics are very hard to come by but it is widely quoted that 90–95% of dieters regain their lost weight. Whatever the true numbers, if dieting was truly effective, your problem would have been solved with the first one! Lets look at why diets aren't the answer for most people.

Your Body is Programmed to Survive

While it seems that diets often backfire, this is simply the result of your body adapting to being under-fueled. Your body has primitive, complex survival mechanisms that help keep you alive during limited periods of starvation. However, now that food is abundant and readily available, most modern "famines" are the result of self-imposed diets. Your body just doesn't realize that you are doing this on purpose!

Initially you lose water and fat. However, since muscle burns calories, some of your muscle mass may be given up to lower your metabolism and "save you" from starvation. And though it seems unfair, as you lose weight, your lighter body may not need as many calories. As a result, you burn fewer calories each day and your weight loss slows down. This is the frustrating "plateau" that dieters so often

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experience.

If you return to your previous eating habits when the diet is over, your body quickly replaces its fat stores. But unless you are actively exercising, you will not regain the majority of the muscle tissue you lost during the diet. Ultimately, this causes you to have a lower metabolic rate and a higher body fat percentage than before the diet. This explains the irony that most people are less healthy than before they tried to lose weight by going on a diet!

Deprivation Can Lead to Cravings

But it is not just your body that rebels when you diet. Your mind rebels too. When certain foods are forbidden, you may begin to feel deprived which can lead to powerful cravings. When you finally give in

to the cravings for these "bad" foods, you may feel guilty and out of control. You may give up the diet and binge on the foods you've been missing. This often leads people to develop a painful "love-hate" relationship with food. Of course, most dieters blame themselves when the diet fails, but in reality, dieting itself is to blame.

Diets Ignore the Rest of You

Another problem is that diets and other restrictive means of losing weight focus on what and how much to eat and don't address why people eat in the first place.

Many people eat or overeat because of environmental triggers such as appealing food, automatic meal times, or learned messages like "clean your plate". Restaurants, break rooms, holidays, and vacations are full of tempting "bad" foods that aren't allowed on a diet. You can deal with it while your motivation is high, but in the long run, you may decide that the diet just isn't worth it.

In addition, many of your urges to eat may be triggered by emotions such as stress, boredom, loneliness, sadness, or anger. Since these emotional triggers don't go away simply by imposing a strict set of rules, you may try to cope with them by eating the "allowed foods". In other words, you never really give up emotional eating or learn other coping skills, so when the diet is over, you go right back to eating the way you did before.

So What Does Work?

At this point you are probably thinking, "If diets don't work, what am I supposed to do?" To begin with, if the diet plan you are considering isn't something you can imagine doing for the rest of your life, then don't bother doing it for a day!

It is time to face the fact that the key to solving your struggle with weight and food does not lie in a magical, or even a logical, combination of diet and exercise. The real solution lies in finally addressing your relationship with food and learning to recognize and effectively cope with your eating triggers. Start by asking yourself "Am I hungry?" whenever you have and urge to eat. When you relearn to trust your innate ability to know when and how much to eat, you will begin to eat in a way that fuels your

body, mind, and spirit.

Michelle May, M.D. is a practicing Board Certified Family Physician with expertise in the cognitive-behavioral aspects of weight management. She is the author of *Am I Hungry? What To Do When Diets Don't Work* in collaboration with a Registered Dietitian and Psychologist. Visit her website www.AmIHungry.com for more ideas on managing weight without dieting.

Diets, Diets, Diets...Do They Work?

By Mike Yeager

Almost everyone has attempted to follow diets and weight loss programs at some time in their lives. The trouble with so many diets and low fat diets is that they are hard to follow. Some diets leave you hungry and craving food all the time. A healthy diet is one that you feel good about following and encourages you to eat in a healthy way while at the same time reducing the overall calorie content.

When choosing from among the many diets available, keep in mind what your reason is for altering your eating and exercise habits. Do you want to feel better and have some more energy? Are you tired of not fitting into your clothes and that has caused you to consider one of the weight loss diets? Experts agree that it's not good to try and lose excess weight in a quick manner. It's better to take your time and incorporate a package of exercise, proper nutrition and, in general, balance.

As with all new diets, weight loss and exercise plans, it's always best to consult with your physician and have a complete physical examination before starting.

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Mike Yeager
Publisher

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