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FAD DIETS: MAKE AN EDUCATED DECISION

From “Understanding Nutrition” 9th Ed, Whitney & Rolfes

The latest and greatest weight loss diet-again.

You have heard the names: the Atkins New Diet Revolution, the Calories Don't Count Diet, the Protein Power diet, the Carbohydrate Addict's Diet, the Lo-Carbo Diet, the Healthy for Life Diet, the zone Diet. Year after year, “new and improved” diets appear on bookstore shelves and circulate among friends. People of all sizes eagerly try the best diet on the market ever, hoping this one will really work. And sometimes it seems to work for a while, but more often than not, its success is short-lived.

Realizing that fad diets do not offer a safe and effective plan for weight loss, health professionals speak out. New fad diets can keep making outrageous claims, however, because no one requires their advocates to prove what they say. They do not have to conduct credible research on the benefits or dangers of their diets. They can simply make recommendations and then later, if questioned, search for bits and pieces of research that support the conclusions they have already reached. That's backwards. Diet and health recommendations should follow years of sound research that has been reviewed by panels of scientists before being offered to the public.

Because anyone can publish anything-in books or on the Internet-peddlers of fad diets can make unsubstantiated statements that fall far short of the truth, but sound impressive to the uninformed. They offer distorted bits of legitimate research. Anyone who wants to believe them is forced to wonder how the thousands of scientists working on obesity research over the past century could possibly have missed such obvious connections.

Whatever the name, here are some guidelines for identifying fad diets and other weight-loss scams. Keep these things in mind when you evaluate the next “latest and greatest weight-loss diet” that comes along.

1. They promise dramatic, rapid weight loss. Weight loss should be gradual and not exceed 2 pounds per week.
2. They promote diets that are nutritionally unbalanced or extremely low in calories. Diets should provide a reasonable number of calories-not less than 1200/day.
3. They use liquid formulas instead of foods.
4. Foods should accommodate a person's taste preferences and financial means.



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5. 4. They attempt to make clients dependent upon special foods or devices. Programs should teach clients how to make good choices from the conventional food supply.
6. They fail to encourage permanent, realistic lifestyle changes. Programs should provide physical activity plans that involve moving your body each day and strategies to help correct poor eating habits.
7. They fail to inform clients of the risks associated with the program. They should provide information about dropout rates, the long-term success of their clients, and possible side effects.
8. They promote unproven weight-loss aids such as starch blockers, diuretics, sauna belts, body wraps, passive exercise, electrical muscle-stimulating devices, spirulina, amino acid supplements, or 'unique' ingredients etc.
9. They fail to provide for weight maintenance after the program ends.

Source: The American College of Sports Medicine, ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1995), pp. 218-219

