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Fans for Fads: Are Fad Diets Helpful?

Dr. Kristopher R. Grimes, Associate Professor and State Extension Specialist
for Nutrition and Nutrition Education

Over the past 30 years, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of people who are classified as either overweight or obese. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the incidence in certain adult populations exceeds 70%. Research has shown that excessive fat is correlated with greater chances for heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer, depression, and many other comorbidities.

Encouragingly, many people have chosen to address this concern head on through exercise and dietary measures. Fitness programs such as CrossFit, Zumba, yoga, martial arts, and other programs have gained popularity as people have focused on their health. Likewise, as health-minded individuals change their eating habits, popular diets—or “fad diets”—have made their way into our homes. Some of these diets focus on calorie deficits, others focus on manipulation of metabolism. But, do these diets work and how healthy are they? Below are different categories of diets, their impact on weight, and possible health risks.

Low Carb Diets

Low carb diets starting gaining steam in the 1970's to help improve weight loss. The goal behind these types of diets is to deplete the body of stored carbohydrates and prioritize fat for energy. Individuals respond differently to the diet, with some observing rapid weight loss at first followed by a plateau. Others see a slower response over time. Some of these diets include:

- **Atkins Diet:** Developed by Dr. Robert Atkins in the 1970's, this is still one of the most popular low carb diets. According to Atkins.com, participants generally limit their carbs to 20-100 net carbs per day depending upon their goals. This is a highly commercial diet, providing a diverse set of foods specifically aimed at Atkins participants.
- **Keto Diet:** Originally developed to help treat individuals with epilepsy, the keto diet is similar to the Atkins Diet because there is an extreme limit to the number of carbohydrates a person eats. However, participants are also encouraged to eat a limited amount of protein as well. The idea is to shift your energy production from carbs to fats through a process called ketosis. This is a popular diet with athletes and some who are trying to stave off diabetes and metabolic syndrome.
- **South Beach Diet:** This diet, originating in the South Beach area of Florida, begins as a low-carb diet initially, focusing on higher



amounts of lean proteins and healthy fruits and vegetables. While the initial phases of the diet focus on lower net carbohydrates, as you progress, you are encouraged to add healthy carbs, in moderation, back into your diet.

While it is certainly true that low carb diets can cause weight loss, there are also some drawbacks. First, such a specialized diet can be difficult to maintain for a long period of time, especially considering the carbohydrate-rich diets in the West. In addition, with the reduction of carbs, you are naturally going to increase your proportion of fat and protein which could affect triglyceride and cholesterol levels. Finally, low carb diets could place you at risk for a deficiency in certain minerals and vitamins, like Vitamin B.

High Protein Diets

High protein diets often get confused with low carbohydrate diets, but there are significant differences. First, diets emphasizing high protein do not necessarily emphasize low carbohydrates. In fact, depending on an individual's goals, a person may have higher than normal carbohydrate intake. Secondly, the amount of protein that individuals consume can be extreme in comparison to diets like the Atkins and Keto Diets.

High protein diets are very popular among athletes and fitness advocates. Generally higher protein diets focus on lean meats and plant-based proteins with low-fat content. In addition,

higher protein content can be more satiating which reduces the number of overall calories a person may eat. Healthy individuals who choose lean meats and a variety of fruits and vegetables generally will not be affected negatively by the diet. However, if individuals have kidney disease, consume excess red meats, or deprive themselves of fruits and vegetables could see a detriment to their health.

Gluten Diets

One of the most popular diets on the market these days is the “gluten-free diet.” It seems that wherever we turn, gluten-free products and recipes are being marketed to the everyday consumer. Gluten-free desserts, breads, pastas, and other foods contain the notation that they are, in fact, gluten-free. Gluten is a general name for a family of proteins that is found primarily in foods containing wheat, barley, and rye. For most people, they don’t have to give gluten a second thought. When they eat gluten containing foods, their body digests the foods, absorbs nutrients, and metabolizes the molecules the way we were designed to. However, for some people—such as individuals with coeliac disease or gluten sensitivity—gluten can cause serious problems.

Unfortunately, many people who are perfectly healthy are attracted to this diet because of its popularity and they believe it to be more healthy. The problem is that a gluten-free diet is highly restricted, expensive, and can make it more difficult to consume all your necessarily micronutrients. Furthermore, for healthy individuals, going gluten-free is not a huge benefit.

Fasting, Detox, and other Fad Diets

Other diets include intermittent fasting (from several hours to an entire day), specialized detox diets (using lemon juices and other agents) and diets, such as the “blood type diet” (eating foods that are specialized for your blood type). One of the reason that fad diets are so popular is because many individuals are looking for the “magic pill” to reduce weight. In addition, there is the misconception that are bodies are so different that we need to customize a diet to fit every person. This may be true for people with certain illnesses, goals (such as body building) or genetic conditions, but for most of us, these diets are overly complicated and are difficult to maintain long term.

Fasting is popular among many individuals, especially for religious observance, and for short periods of time, can be beneficial. However, fasting can become a problem if it is leaned on too heavily and can cause malnutrition or even lead to dependence and eating disorders. Likewise, detox diets sound medical and very effective. However, when we eat the recommended allotment of fruits and vegetables, drink enough water, and have a high fiber diet, our body naturally detoxes. And finally, there are diets that target certain medical conditions or genetic markers, but this should be recommended by your physician to help treat a condition, not as a regular diet plan. So where do we go?



So What’s the Verdict?

Except in cases where you have recommendations by medical staff to treat or prevent certain illnesses or conditions, diets generally have short-term success that is difficult to maintain over a lifetime. Most individuals who participate in a “fad diet” end up gaining back their losses once they are finished with the diet. There are individuals who have found success with particular diets, but that’s because they have incorporated the diet into their lifestyle. And that’s the key!

Diets, by nature, are usually temporary. The best way to reduce your weight is by making, and committing to, lifestyle changes. A commitment to eating healthier and staying active for a lifetime will produce better, longer lasting, results than specialized, expensive, and temporary diets. Here are a few tips to help change your lifestyle:

- Eat lean meats that are baked, roasted, or grilled.
- Consume at least 6-9 servings of fruits and vegetable per day. Make sure that you are eating a variety of colors and types of produce.
- Limit your grains to 4-6 servings per day and make sure that at least half of the grains are whole grain.
- Eliminate, as much as possible, fried foods, processed foods, and foods with added sugars and trans fats.
- Drink at least 8 glasses of water per day (at least 64 ounces).
- Exercise (both strength and cardiovascular training) for about 30 minutes each day.
- Avoid keeping baked goods, candy, and other desserts in the home. If you buy it, you’ll likely eat it!
- Make a grocery list to help you stay on task.
- Check out choosemyplate.gov for more helpful advice and tools to improve your health.
- REMEMBER: Always consult your physician and/or dietician to make sure a specific meal plan or strategy is right for you.