

## Which Diet?

*Of all the diets out there, which one will help you lose weight?*

We've all been there. You're unhappy with your weight, so you decide to go on a diet. You talk to a few people, and decide on the most popular diet to follow. You binge on all our favourite foods before the diet and mentally prepare yourself for deprivation. You know it has worked for a few people so you're optimistic. Surely it'll work for you too. But does it?

In this article, I take a look at the most common diets around and whether or not they work. The analysis will hopefully bring you closer to your end goal: weight loss.

**The Atkins diet** is based on eating plenty of protein and very few carbohydrates. The theory behind it is that you restrict the production of insulin (induced by eating carbohydrates) and therefore reduce hunger, cravings and fat storage. Does it work? The theory behind the Atkins diet (involving insulin and metabolism) makes it one of the most effective weight loss diets around today. The only problem is that very few people are informed of the details of the Atkins diet and many think it's only about eating meat and eggs. The truth is that Atkins, beyond the initial two weeks, does involve eating carbohydrates. But many people enjoy the initial results and continue to avoid carbohydrates past the specified period. Eating too much protein over a long period of time makes the blood very acidic which can have side-effects such as mood swings, headaches, hair loss, mineral loss, and more.

**The South Beach Diet** is one of the most popular these days and it is also based on insulin control. During the first phase, it concentrates on high protein and no carbohydrates. In the second, you introduce more healthy carbohydrates such as wholegrains and certain fruits and vegetables. And in the third phase (the maintenance phase), you continue to eat the right kinds of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. The great thing about this diet is that it teaches people about eating quality food, not about restrictions and short-term results. The effect of reducing refined, processed carbohydrate can often be seen very soon after starting, and the long-term effects are positive. However, there are some misguided advice, for example, when it comes to using artificial sweeteners, dairy products, or margarine.

**Calorie-Counting Diets** involve the basic theory of taking in less calories than you burn each day. It's a very sound theory and it makes a lot of sense. The only problem with calorie-counting diets is that they don't take health into consideration. As long as a food is low in calories, then it's ok to eat it; regardless of its nutritional content. For example, diet cokes and coffee are abundant on this diet. While they contribute very few calories to the body, they are hazardous to our health. Also, calorie-counting requires that you know how many calories each food has, not allowing room for spontaneous snacking and eating out.

**The GI Diet** is based on taking into account the glycaemic index (GI) of each carbohydrate food eaten. Foods with a high GI (sugar being the highest) are absorbed very quickly, causing blood sugar fluctuations which mean cravings and weight gain. Foods with a low GI (such as wholegrains, vegetables, and pulses) on the other hand, are absorbed more slowly, giving sustained energy and reduced cravings. This diet also works by reducing the release of insulin, which is usually caused by eating refined and sugary foods. However, it is hard to maintain because you have to be aware of the GI counts of all the foods on your plate.

**Food Combining** diets are about understanding which foods to mix. In general, you're not supposed to eat protein and carbohydrates at the same meal because each food group requires different times to digest so it may upset digestion. But that's not all there is to food combining;

not many people go into the details and regulations of this diet and therefore end up doing it wrong. Most people lose weight on this diet initially because they tend to cut down portions as they're trying to figure out what they can eat. However, it is a diet that is very difficult to maintain, can be very tricky because many foods naturally contain protein and carbohydrates (e.g. beans), and can also mess up blood sugar levels as protein is needed to reduce the effect of carbohydrates on the body.

**Raw Food Diet** basically means that you eat raw foods instead of cooked. The theory behind it is that raw, plant-based foods contain a lot of nutrients and enzymes that haven't been lost in the cooking process. And, in theory, if you're getting all the nutrients you need from raw foods then you wouldn't need to consume the extra calories. It may work well for healthy people with strong digestive systems. However, some people may find it taxing on digestion as raw food is harder to break down than cooked food and some of us do better on a warm meal at the end of a long day.

**Fat-free diets** are still popular although the trend is slowly phasing out. With fat-free diets, you're supposed to stay away from all sources of fat, which contribute calories and therefore weight gain. These diets have been proven ineffective for several reasons. First of all, we need some fat to function as human beings; especially the omega 3 and 6 'good' fats that are crucial for brain function, hormone balance, and weight loss. Secondly, research has found that weight gain is not only connected to fat consumption. It is now known that it is high insulin levels (caused by too much carbohydrates) that trigger fat storage and weight gain, not fat itself. Furthermore, many 'fat-free' products contain more sugar to make up for the lost taste, therefore causing more damage than good.

**Detox Diets** can range from one-day drinks to 3-months of wholegrains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and water. The theory behind it is that when you cleanse your body of toxins, you give your digestion a break and you also help relax the other organs of elimination such as the liver, kidneys, and lymphatic system. This increases the efficiency of the body, making it easier to lose weight. Do they work? Detox diets are always a good start to a weight loss programme because they remove unwanted toxins that usually reside in fat stores. However, they are not recommended over the long-term and are best used in conjunction with an overall change in diet and lifestyle habits.

### ***Which diet works best?***

As you may have noticed, these diets have TWO things in common : they are temporary and they are a 'one size fits all' approach. Although some may be effective at serving the immediate purpose of weight loss, a lot of the initial weight loss comes from losing water rather than actual fat. They are not effective long-term solutions to weight gain, and they are not catered for individual needs.

Going on frequent diets defines what is referred to as the Cannon Conundrum. This is the theory that after going on a diet, you end up gaining all the weight back, plus more. Your body's metabolism and fat structure changes after each diet and you end up storing more fat, in all the wrong places. And with every failed diet, you feel more disappointed with yourself, which has long-term emotional and psychological effects, which are bound to affect your self-esteem, body image, and your relationship with food. It's a vicious cycle.

### **Tip of the Month**

Weight gain is not a problem of food only. You have to look at the emotional aspects that

got you there in the first place. Psychology plays a very big role in weight issues. Is food filling a gap in your life? Do you eat some foods because they remind of a time or place you'd rather be? Are you eating because you're depressed, lonely, bored?

Furthermore, your lifestyle is also important. Skipping meals and snacks makes you gain weight. And if you're not exercising and depending only on diets to help you lose weight, then it's only a matter of time before you plateau.

The most effective weight loss programmes are those done with a support group, under the supervision of a qualified expert.

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