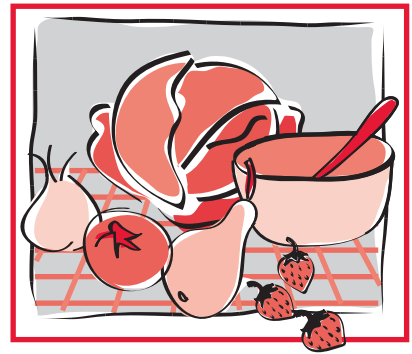


Weight-Loss Products, Programs, and Diets

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by L. Bellows and R. Moore*

Approximately 70% of Americans over 20 years of age meet the criteria for being overweight or obese. Excess body fat from an unhealthy diet and lack of exercise can also increase the risk for health problems such as hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes. According to the *USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, healthy keys to weight management include: monitoring calorie and fat intake, staying active, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Certain dieting and weight-loss resources may include over-the-counter products, commercial programs, and diets. Short-term weight-loss from a low calorie intake is possible with many of these methods. However, most weight-loss methods fail to contribute to healthy long-term weight maintenance, though some may provide helpful guidance regarding a healthy diet, positive lifestyle changes, and physical activity. The following information compares the strengths and weaknesses of several popular weight-loss products, programs, and diets, and also discusses alternatives to dieting that include healthy recommendations for effective weight-loss and long-term weight maintenance.

Weight-Loss Products

Weight-loss products may be sold in prescription or over-the-counter form- and may include pills, supplements, beverages, or medication. Many of these substances may have serious side-effects and often do not work for long-term weight-loss. In the past decade, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has banned many weight-loss products including the appetite suppressant PPA (phenylpropanolamine hydrochloride), which can increase the risk of stroke. Additionally, over-the-counter pills

that contain the drug ephedra have been banned and are now illegal due to serious side-effects that include dizziness, increased blood pressure and heart rate, chest pain, heart attack, stroke, seizure, and even death. Essentially, many weight-loss products contain drugs and other ingredients that could potentially lead to adverse side-effects that ultimately place the consumer at risk for serious health consequences.

Another product intended for weight-loss is powdered beverage formulas or shakes- often mixed with a glass of milk and substituted for one or more meals. Those who consume these beverages may lose weight initially, though it is usually regained once the beverages are discontinued. By relying on shakes instead of whole foods, dieters follow artificial dieting methods and avoid learning how to incorporate healthy food choices into their lives.

Weight-Loss Programs

Weight-loss programs are usually run by a commercial business or organization that provides weight-loss guidance. These programs may be run by a one individual, a gym, or a nationwide service. They may also sell products to accompany their program which may include exercise equipment, workout DVDs, or food and beverage items. Ideally, an effective weight-loss program should include guidance in maintaining a healthy weight after the weight-loss phase is over. The program should teach skills that help improve dietary habits, increase physical activity, and help change lifestyle habits- with an ultimate goal of long-term weight maintenance.

Commercial weight-loss programs such as *Weight Watchers*, *Jenny Craig*, *NutriSystem* and *Diet Center*, usually offer a 1,000 to 1,500 calorie diet and individual or group counseling. Though many individuals find long-term success with these programs, some participants still struggle with healthy

Quick Facts

- The most effective way to lose weight and maintain weight-loss over time is to monitor calorie intake, follow a healthy balanced diet, and be physically active.
- Effective weight-loss strategies should encourage realistic goals and permanent healthy changes in eating habits.
- Many diet products and programs offer a quick short-term fix, but there is no “magic bullet” for weight-loss.
- When investigating weight-loss products or programs beware of high costs, pressure to buy special foods or pills, and fraudulent claims.

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weight-maintenance. In the past, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has brought action against some of these companies, challenging their weight loss and maintenance claims.

Refer to a medical professional for recommendations concerning weight loss programs available in your community.

Weight-Loss Diets

The term “*diet*” simply refers to food and drink that is regularly provided or consumed. However, it can also refer to eating or drinking sparingly or according to a prescribed set of rules. A diet may be considered healthy or unhealthy, often depending on individual needs. An unhealthy diet is often referred to as a *fad diet*, which is designed to help one lose weight and is temporarily popular. The decision to follow a fad diet is often made without the support or recommendation of a medical professional, and considered an unhealthy practice. An example of a fad diet might include recommendations that severely restrict calories or even entire food groups in an unhealthy way. Cleanses, juice diets, and detoxification diets are all examples of fad diets. Although many fad diets promise quick weight loss, most are not recommended for long-term use and do not support a healthful and balanced diet. Though many individuals may lose weight initially, it is often easily regained. At two-year follow-ups, research demonstrates a very low success rate for many of these diets. In fact, only 5% of the individuals who go on a diet each year keep off the weight that they lose.

In contrast, highly effective weight-loss techniques involve following a healthy eating pattern or lifestyle, with a goal of long-term weight maintenance and lowered risk for chronic disease. For example, a healthy eating pattern known as the *DASH Eating Plan* (similar to the *2010 Dietary Recommendations for Americans*) does not involve calorie restriction. Instead, it encourages the consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole-grains, low-fat dairy products, and lean meat.

Tips for Choosing a Weight-Loss Product, Program, or Diet

Not all weight-loss products, programs, and diets are harmful or unhealthy. Before investing in any of these items or services, ensure that the following criteria are met:

- It is considered safe, and provides all of the recommended daily allowances (RDAs) for vitamins, minerals, and macronutrients.
- It does not advise consuming less than 1,200 calories per day. Consult a medical professional who can recommend an individualized daily calorie intake safe for weight loss.
- Slow, steady weight loss is emphasized, approximately 1-2 pounds weight loss per week.
- There is no list of forbidden, or “bad” foods.
- Hunger is minimized.
- Weight maintenance guidelines and a follow-up program are provided.
- Balanced food choices from all food groups are emphasized, as well as sensible portion sizes and physical activity.
- There is no promotion of specially formulated foods or vitamin supplements, especially if they are not cost-effective and not practical for long-term use.
- Information concerning the costs for membership, weekly fees, and counseling, is provided.
- Those running the program have the proper credentials (Registered Dietitians, Medical Doctors, or other nutrition and exercise professionals).
- Information regarding the health risks and program side-effects is provided.
- Establishing lifelong healthy habits is emphasized.
- The program fits into one’s lifestyle.

Strategies for Effective Weight-Loss and Health Weigh Maintenance

Balance Caloric Intake with Energy Expenditure

Calorie requirements vary from person to person. Factors such as age, gender, body size and composition, physical condition, and activity level, all play a role in determining individual caloric requirements.

The number of calories required by one’s body throughout the day to perform involuntary, vital tasks such as breathing, producing body heat, maintaining heart function, and sending messages to and from the brain, is called the basal metabolic rate or BMR. A person’s BMR actually

represents about 60% of the body’s daily energy needs. Approximately 30% of the body’s daily energy needs is used for movement, and can include simple tasks such as walking to get the mail, folding laundry, or washing the dishes. The remaining 10% of the body’s energy requirement is used to digest food and absorb the nutrients from food. To estimate your daily calorie requirements, visit the website [ChooseMyPlate](#).

To maintain weight, the number of calories consumed must *equal* the number of calories the body burns. For those trying to lose weight, the number of calories consumed must be *fewer* than the number burned each day. The most effective way to accomplish weight-loss is to cut back on calories by decreasing food intake, while increasing physical activity.

Foods to Increase

An important component of successful weight-loss and weight maintenance is including fruits and vegetables, whole-grains, and fat-free dairy products, for a healthful diet.

- Fruits and vegetables, especially those that are bright in color (dark green or red and orange), provide important antioxidants that may play a vital role in disease prevention. Fruits and vegetables are also naturally low in calories, which help in weight-loss and weight-maintenance. For more information, see fact sheet [Dietary Fiber](#).
- Whole-grains are also an important component of a healthy diet, and contain high levels of important nutrients as well as dietary fiber.
- Low-fat or fat-free dairy products such as milk, yogurt, and cheese, will provide adequate nutrients along with less calories from fat.

Foods to Decrease

An important component of successful weight-loss and weight maintenance is including fruits and vegetables, whole-grains, and fat-free dairy products, for a healthful diet.

- Fat contains 9 calories per gram, which is more than twice the calories of protein and carbohydrates (4 calories per gram each). Limiting one’s fat intake will not only lower overall dietary fat and calories, but also reduce a critical risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

A healthy goal for fat intake includes obtaining 20-35% or less of total calories from dietary fat (specifically receiving less than 10% of calories from saturated fat, and eliminate trans-fat completely). For more information on dietary fat, [Dietary Fat and Cholesterol](#).

- Lowering sodium intake to less than 2,300 milligrams, (less than 1,500 milligrams for older adults, African Americans, or those with health conditions that increase risk for high blood pressure), is also an important component of a healthful diet. Foods high in sodium are often processed, pre-packaged, and may have more calories from added fats and refined sugar. For more information on sodium, see fact sheet [Sodium and the Diet](#).
- Products with added sugar include sugar-sweetened beverages (such as soda, sports drinks, and energy drinks), and items such as cookies, pastries, ice-cream, and candy. These products are often highly processed and contain empty calories (foods that contain calories of little nutritional value). For more information on added sugars, see fact sheet [Sugar and Sweeteners](#).

Strategies to Change Eating Behaviors

The following behavior change techniques can help alter poor eating habits:

- Record unhealthy eating habits in order to identify places, emotions, or activities that may lead to inappropriate eating.
- To change unhealthy habits, make simple changes such as eating meals away from the television or computer. When feeling stressed, choose to go for a walk or call a friend instead of eating unhealthy foods.
- Pay attention to portion size when cutting back on the number of calories consumed. Choosing sensible portions is an important factor in controlling calorie intake and managing weight.

Physical Activity

Those who alter their eating habits and stay physically active are the most successful at losing weight and maintaining weight-loss. Physical activity burns calories, raises metabolism, and helps with body fat loss. Staying active also promotes a sense of well-being, reduces stress, and has beneficial effects on HDL “good” cholesterol.

Find an activity that is enjoyable. If additional health problems also accompany overweight or obesity, consult with a medical professional before beginning an exercise program. Start slowly, and then work up to at least three to five 30 minute sessions of moderate exercise per week, or three to five 15 minute sessions of vigorous exercise per week. Strengthening exercises such as sit-ups or weight lifting should also be incorporated two days per week.

Examples of Popular Diet Books

Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution

2009—Robert C. Atkins, M.D. Additional books: Atkins for Life

- **Characteristics:** High protein, high fat, and very low carbohydrate. Claims to help those with food intolerances or allergies, heart disease, diabetes, and yeast infections. Megavitamin/mineral supplements recommended daily.
- **Strengths:** Weight loss will likely result due to the low calorie eating plan. Triglyceride levels may decrease due to limited carbohydrate intake. High fat intake provides satiety for a long period of time.
- **Weaknesses:** It is nutritionally unbalanced, restrictive, and allows no bread, pasta, or cereal, and extremely low in fruits and vegetables. Ketoacidosis (the breakdown of fat and protein) is encouraged, which may be harmful for some individuals.
- **Comments:** Does not teach good eating habits, and may be potentially dangerous. Claims are not nutritionally sound and not intended for maintenance of weight loss. Initial weight loss is mostly water weight.

The Beck Diet Solution: Train your brain to think like a thin person

2007—Judith S. Beck

- **Characteristics:** Six week plan based on behavior change through cognitive therapy. Does not include a diet plan, though a healthy diet and consult with a dietitian is encouraged.
- **Strengths:** It is realistic, and does not expect behavior change overnight. Provides skills to successfully change thoughts and behaviors regarding food.
- **Weaknesses:** A significant time commitment, and a diet plan or

recommendations for what one should or shouldn’t eat are not provided.

- **Comments:** Appropriate for any individual looking to lose weight. Focuses on the tools needed to change thinking patterns and maintain a healthy weight throughout life.

Eat to Live: The Amazing Nutrient-Rich Program for Fast and Sustained Weight Loss

2011—Joel Fuhrman, M.D.

- **Characteristics:** Encourages nutrient dense foods and consuming foods with a higher ratio of nutrients to calories. Two stages: a “6 week plan” with specific guidelines for foods to consume, and a “life plan” slightly less structured focusing on maintaining the diet over time.
- **Strengths:** Focuses on health rather than weight loss in order to maintain long-term health.
- **Weaknesses:** The “6 week plan” is restrictive- eliminating all dairy and animal products, and no in-between meal snacking. Physical activity is not addressed.
- **Comments:** Weight loss will result, mostly due to decreased calorie consumption. Whole food groups are eliminated, and may result in inadequate nutrient intake.

The GenoType Diet: Change Your Genetic Destiny

2007—Peter D’Adamo with Catherine Whitney

- **Characteristics:** Specific dietary and exercise recommendations are followed according to one’s “GenoType.” Diet based on the science of epigenetics (the interaction between one’s genetics and environment).
- **Strengths:** Personalized diet, and includes exercises. Provides information on serving size and portion sizes. Diet is balanced and full of variety.
- **Weaknesses:** The long term effectiveness of this diet is largely unknown. Preparing meals may be difficult, especially if each family member belongs to a different “GenoType.”
- **Comments:** Easy to follow, and brings self-awareness of food consumed. Supplements and other products sold by this author should be used with caution.

The New Abs Diet- The 6 Week Plan to Flatten Your Stomach and Keep You Lean for Life

2010—David Zinczenko with Ted Spiker

- **Characteristics:** Three meals and 3 snacks evenly spaced throughout the day, planned around the “Abs Diet Power 12 Food Groups” (nuts, beans, eggs, lean meats, whole-grains, and berries). Refined carbohydrates are limited as well as alcoholic beverages.
- **Strengths:** Weight-loss results are likely because the plan is flexible with no severe restrictions, and little extreme or controversial components. Recipes, a nutrition guide, and an exercise program, are included.
- **Weaknesses:** No significant weaknesses, though both authors lack formal expertise in nutrition.
- **Comments:** Realistic and practical for the average individual. Recommended foods are easy to find and affordable. Short-term and long-term weight loss is likely.

The Paleo Diet

2010—Loren Cordain, Ph.D

- **Characteristics:** Ancestral dietary pattern (2.5 million years ago), believed to reduce the risk for chronic disease and lead to weight loss. Includes unlimited lean meats, fish, fruits, and non-starchy vegetables. Avoid cereals, legumes, dairy products, and processed foods.
- **Strengths:** Recommends high intake of fruit and vegetables and reduced intake of saturated fat. Suggests eating fewer processed foods.
- **Weaknesses:** Promotes avoidance of cereals, legumes, and dairy products, which may lead to inadequacy of important vitamins, minerals, and food constituents.
- **Comments:** Not a realistic approach for many, from a nutritional and environmental standpoint.

The Sonoma Diet

2005—Dr. Connie Guttersen, R.D., Ph.D

- **Characteristics:** Three stages, or “waves,” with certain foods and portion sizes that should be consumed for each “wave.”
- **Strengths:** Emphasizes whole grains, vegetables, nutrient dense foods, and low sugar diet. Permanent weight loss is emphasized through behavior modification.

- **Weaknesses:** None.
- **Comments:** Provides healthy weight loss with low calorie but nutrient-dense foods. Discusses the importance of exercise.

South Beach Diet

2005—Arthur Agatston, M.D

- **Characteristics:** Based on glycemic index, promotes switching to “good carbs” to control cravings and prevent insulin resistance. Recommends “good fats” for heart disease prevention and to control hunger pangs.
- **Strengths:** Emphasizes whole-grains, legumes, low-fat dairy, vegetables, and heart-healthy fats.
- **Weaknesses:** Unnecessarily restricts “high glycemic index” fruits and vegetables such as carrots, bananas, pineapple, and other fruits. Difficult to maintain long term.
- **Comments:** Diet is low in calories, which is most likely responsible for weight-loss. Diet plan dichotomizes foods into “good” and “bad.”

YOU: On A Diet-The Owner’s Manual for Waist Management

2009—Mehmet C. Oz M.D. and Michael F. Roizen M.D.

- **Characteristics:** Focuses on controlling waistline, rather than weight. Claims the relationship between chemicals and hormones that influence hunger, and those signaling satiety, are the keys to ending yo-yo dieting. Lists foods and supplements that fight fat, decrease appetite, and combat inflammation. Also discusses current options for drugs and weight-loss surgery.
- **Strengths:** Makes no ‘magic bullet’ claims. Focuses on proper food choices, portion control, and exercise.
- **Weaknesses:** Some question about factual accuracy (i.e. female body produces progesterin). Some advice is not necessarily supported by peer reviewed research (i.e. eating at night makes you fat). Some readers are turned off by “dumbed down” language and “childish” cartoons used throughout the book.
- **Comments:** A popular diet book, partly due to the author’s high profile in the media. Most advice is sound, but exercise and menu recommendations may be unrealistic for most readers.

Eat This Not That: Thousands of Simple Food Swaps That Can Save You 10, 20, 30 Pounds-or More!

2007—David Zinczenko with Matt Goulding

- **Characteristics:** A guide to making more healthful food choices when dining out at restaurants.
- **Strengths:** The guide is easy to use and simple. It helps one make more healthful choices when dining out, and exposes drawbacks to meals that may seem healthful (i.e. high fat fish filet at Burger King, or high sodium salmon teriyaki at Macaroni Grill). It is easy to carry around for quick reference.
- **Weaknesses:** Some suggestions may be confusing or contradictory for many readers.
- **Comments:** Though cooking meals at home is almost always more healthful than eating out, this guide serves as a helpful resource for making healthy choices when dining out .

Common Weight-Loss Programs

Diet Center (www.dietcenter.com)

- **Characteristics:** Regular weigh-ins and individual counseling. Multiple diet plans available, catered to both women and men.
- **Strengths:** Encourages exercise. Strong support in psychological aspects of weight-loss.
- **Weaknesses:** Heavy reliance on supplements.
- **Comments:** No contract required. Provides an in-person or online program option.

Jenny Craig Weight Loss Clinic (www.jennycraig.com)

- **Characteristics:** Weekly classes and individual counseling sessions are available. Both pre-portioned foods and grocery store foods are used in the program. Lifestyle management, motivation, and nutritional information, are also provided.
- **Strengths:** Emphasizes behavior education and practical eating skills. Expected weight loss 1 to 2 lbs/week. Exercise is encouraged.
- **Weaknesses:** The food sold by Jenny Craig can be expensive (though grocery

store foods are also encouraged). The plan does not consider those with food allergies.

- **Comments:** Based on sound weight-loss principles, focuses on weight management with no wild claims or promises. Provides an in-person or online program option.

NutriSystem (www.nutrisystem.com)

- **Characteristics:** Select a plan and food options for 28 days (breakfast, lunch, dinner, and dessert for each day). Food is delivered to you. Follow the meal planner provided while eating the delivered food and selected grocery items. Track weight loss and access counselors and educational tools online.
- **Strengths:** No points or calorie counting required. Food is pre-portioned. Social support, nutrition education, and exercise tips available online.
- **Weaknesses:** The food delivery is specific for NutriSystem, which may be expensive and does not teach one how to make food choices outside of the program. Counseling is not provided by a Registered Dietitian.
- **Comments:** Offers a money-back guarantee. Center-based company has been replaced with an online option only.

Overeaters Anonymous (www.oa.org)

- **Characteristics:** Group meetings. Twelve-step program deals with physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of overeating. No “diets,” weigh-ins or lectures on food and weight. Primary purpose is to stop compulsive eating.
- **Strengths:** Encouraged to consult qualified professionals if interested in learning about nutrition or seeking professional advice. Provide good support structure.
- **Weaknesses:** Binge eating problems do not apply to everyone.
- **Comments:** No fees, voluntary contributions. Only membership requirement is a desire to stop compulsive eating. Online “meetings” available as well.

TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly) (www.tops.org)

- **Characteristics:** Diet based on a standard diet of regular foods. Group meetings for weekly weigh-ins, education and support. Groups organized locally, variation possible.
- **Strengths:** Nutritionally sound diet. Emphasizes slow, steady weight loss. Encourages camaraderie for support.
- **Comments:** Dues assessed per year. Less commercial than Weight Watchers. Does not sell food products or accept advertising from commercial companies. Nonprofit and noncommercial. Online membership is offered as well.

Weight Watchers (www.weightwatchers.com)

- **Characteristics:** Group meetings for education and support. Individual counseling available. Integrates food, behavior, social support, and exercise. Emphasis on meal planning. Calories not counted daily. Lifestyle fit and convenience is paramount. Weight Watchers food available, not required. Points plan gives points to food based on calories, fat, and fiber. Each person receives a daily point allotment based on current weight. Plan to stay within daily allotment.
- **Strengths:** Nutritionally balanced. Emphasizes slow, steady weight loss. Teaches how to maintain ideal weight. Personal daily exercise plan. No good or bad foods. Focus on sustainable, healthy lifestyle.
- **Comments:** Lifetime membership by maintaining weight within 2 pounds of goal weight for six weeks. Has a meeting-based or online option.

Additional Resources

For more information on a healthy diet, refer to the websites:

- ChooseMyPlate at: www.choosemyplate.gov
- USDA Dietary Guidelines at: www.cnpp.usda.gov/DietaryGuidelines.htm
- Beware of high costs, pressure to buy special foods or pills, and fraudulent claims. For more information on spotting nutrition fraud, see fact sheet [Nutrition Misinformation: How to Identify Fraud and Misleading Claims](#)

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