

# THE DIZZYING DIET DILEMMA

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High fat...low carbohydrate...low fat...high protein ... Jenny Craig... How is one to make sense out of all this? With articles in newspapers, interviews with authors, books, claims and counterclaims, it's no wonder we are all confused. Unfortunately, the entire controversy about diet and weight loss has been distorted by those with books to sell, products on the market, or egos to stroke. Everyone has a gimmick. Misstatements and oversimplifications abound.

The first key piece of information to remember is that you will not lose weight until the number of calories you burn is greater than the number of calories you consume. Depending on their body size, relatively sedentary people will generally burn 1,600 – 2,000 calories per day. Of course, the number of calories burned will increase considerably with activity and exercise.

Beware of books, friends and doctors who tell you that one diet is good and others are bad. These sources of information are often serving their own purposes or lining their pockets. They are often the same sources that find conspiracies within the medical establishment, while pushing “alternative” medicines, vitamins and other potions without scientific support.

Critics of low-fat diets will point out, for instance, that approximately one third of people on low fat diets will not lose significant weight. But that means that two-thirds will lose weight. Not too bad!

Many criticize the American Heart Association's food pyramid, which changes periodically. The AHA diet may well not work for everyone. My own problem with it is that it doesn't state clearly enough that the AHA diet *must* be consumed in the context of caloric limitation. But when a low saturated fat and low sugar diet is combined with a reduction in total calories consumed, it works quite effectively in lowering weight and cholesterol levels.

In my office, I have a “Hall of Fame” in which patients who successfully lose substantial weight over a period of time are placed. I ask these patients one simple question: “How did you do it?” I record the answer, which almost always includes some combination of exercise and calorie restriction.

**This takes time and persistence! Don't expect a miracle – weight doesn't generally rise “all at once,” and will not come off quickly. Be patient, but determined.**

You may remember Dr. Atkins – he became famous with his “Diet Revolution”. Incredibly, he references in his book articles that are contrary to his own statements! He claims that dietary composition (very low carbohydrate) is the only important factor in achieving weight loss. Some of the articles referenced in his book, however, show just the opposite – that composition of the diet matters less than the number of calories consumed.

With respect to the low-carbohydrate fad, a review article in the Journal of the American Medical Association reviewed data from 94 articles featuring low carbohydrate diets. The conclusion: “Among the published studies, participant weight loss while using low-carbohydrate diets was principally associated with decreased caloric intake and increased diet duration but not with reduced carbohydrate content.” Again, studies show that this and other diets will indeed help you lose weight, as long as caloric intake is less than caloric expenditure. Notice a recurring theme regarding caloric intake vs. caloric expenditure?

The **South Beach Diet** is another example. It recommends that the amount of calories from carbohydrates be reduced (though not nearly as much as the Atkins diet). Certainly, if you limit calories from carbohydrates while NOT INCREASING calories from fats and proteins, you will take in fewer calories. This is not complicated. If many of your calories come from a particular source, reduce that source and you will be on your way. The South Beach Diet has a reasonable balance of the various food groups, and many will be able to stay on this diet for an extended period of time, resulting in substantial weight loss. For that reason, I feel that this is a good diet plan.

Yes, America has gotten fatter in the few decades. Do you suppose, just perhaps, that we can explain this not by oversimplifying the problem, but by looking at how America has changed in the last several decades? There has been a dramatic increase in the number of meals eaten out during this time. The number of fast food restaurants has skyrocketed. It has been shown that portion sizes have grown larger. (Have you noticed restaurant plate size and serving size lately?) In the last three decades, caloric intake in the country has increased 200 to 400 calories per day!

If you are the type who likes names for diets, OK. My recommendations most closely follow what is called a “**Mediterranean**” diet, or as mentioned above, the **South Beach Diet**, with calories balanced between fat, carbohydrate and protein. **Jenny Craig**, **Weight Watchers** and **NutriSystems** all have plans that will enable you to lose weight if those plans are adhered to.

The good news is that all of the diets we mentioned can work, as long as you **limit your total caloric intake!** Wherever your calories are coming from - fats, carbohydrates, proteins - **reduce their consumption!!**

- Carbohydrates should be of the complex type, with whole grain foods substituted for simple sugars – minimizing the refined sugars found in desserts, soft drinks

and sweets and cutting down the simple carbohydrates found in such things as potatoes and bread.

- Load the diet with fruits and vegetables.
- Fat should be of the unsaturated type, like olive oil, and should comprise 30% or fewer of total calories consumed. Dietary cholesterol should be strictly limited.
- Remember that it takes a few minutes for the stomach to tell the brain that it is filled, so before piling on a second portion, wait a few minutes. Eat that first portion slower, and limit its size as well.
- You might pick up a copy of the American Heart Association cookbook, or look into the Weight Watcher's plan. Easy on the salt, too!
- Be persistent. This will take patience. Be determined to wage a long war, but be confident that you will be successful if you reduce caloric intake and increase caloric expenditure.

Also a key to weight loss: exercise. Burn calories throughout the day. A flight or two of stairs will burn calories. You will burn roughly 100 calories for every mile you walk. If an increase in caloric intake is avoided, you will lose a pound or two a month just by walking a couple of miles a day. And don't scoff at that -- remember that a couple of pounds a month will mean 20-25 pounds over the course of a year. But the exercise must be frequent and it must not be trivial. A walk around the block on a weekend day is better than nothing, but to burn substantial numbers of calories, you must do more.

**Weigh yourself each day. The moment you begin to do this, you will become more conscious of the foods you eat and the calories you burn.**

The various diet plans on the market may well work. Heaven knows, there will be more to come. How sustainable they are for individuals, though, questionable. What I recommend here instead is not necessarily easy, but following the simple guidelines I outlined will go a long way toward promoting weight loss.