

Fighting the fad in your diet

Fight the fad and do it the right way.
By Ali J. Chernoff

I sigh when I hear my friends discussing fad diets. It's a touchy subject and everyone has an opinion.

But what is the truth? Confusion prevails because of information overload. Diet advice is everywhere, from newspapers to women's magazines to afternoon talk shows. Consumers are hit with new diet book after new diet book.

Yet most of the popular diet books are not based on scientific evidence but on the often unscientific and well-marketed opinions of the authors.

The media twists the situation by focusing on some unimportant but flashy detail of the research or controversy surrounding a new, so-called weight loss phenomenon. This approach may increase attention but will likely not offer useful facts. And writers and publishers have their own interests to further the sale of their products or books. Often it's money.

All of this makes it difficult to sift the truth out of the vast pile of reading material available.

A good way to weed out fad diets is to watch for statements like "weight loss is effortless" or "you will keep the weight off forever" and "these foods are bad for you." These promises often can't be substantiated. Beware also of diets recommending you eliminate an entire food group, are advertised late at night on television, or demonstrate results with "before" and "after" pictures.

The *New York Times Magazine* had an article in the July 7, 2002 issue called *What if Fat*

Doesn't Make You Fat? Essentially a promotion of the Atkin's Diet, this article is a prime example of how key information is often left out of the story. The writer of the article appears to have cobbled together loose facts to make it sound as if high-carbohydrate intake makes people overweight. But that's only half the story.

The writer interviewed many credible physicians who specialize in heart disease, cancer and obesity. They agreed the research shows saturated fat (found in meat products, for example) has adverse effects on cholesterol levels, promotes blood clots, raises insulin levels and damages blood vessels. In the end, they recommended people cut back on saturated fat.

Yet the writer writes "saturated fats will elevate your bad cholesterol but they will also raise your good cholesterol. In other words, it's a virtual wash." The logic of this argument is if you raise both your good and bad cholesterol, the good cholesterol will protect you. No scientific evidence proves this, however.

Often, those who lose weight on high-fat/low-carbohydrate diets are cutting back on their overall calories. This may mean they are losing more water than fat—not a healthy proposition. Yet the writer claims people become obese because of low-fat diets and increased carbohydrate consumption. He suggests it is the pasta with fat-free sauce, the plain bagels and fat-free cookies that are making us fat. He states "We ate more fat-free carbohydrates, which, in turn, made us hungrier and then heavier."

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The writer forgot to mention the 900 calories in a stuffed pizza, 1200 calories in a double burger with cheese and the super-size movie theatre popcorn with a whopping 1600 calories that many of us enjoy munching.

In reality, most of us don't eat a low-fat diet. According to Statistics Canada, the ingestion of added fats (butter, margarine, oils and shortening) has increased as well as our total fat intake since the 1970s. Meanwhile, no research backs up the notion that low-fat diets make us fat.

Another popular diet book, *The Zone*, claims it's bad to eat bananas, cranberries, apple juice, orange juice, bread, bagels, carrots, potatoes, lima beans, granola and pasta. You decide if that makes sense. This book's premise is that primitive man survived mostly on meat and didn't eat whole grains. Where did the diet's author get his information? Not from the Cambridge *Encyclopedia of Human Evolution* by Steve Jones, Robert Marin and David Pelbiam or *The Natural History of Man* by J. Weiner—books suggesting this concept is untrue.

Then we have the *Eat Right For Your Blood Type* diet. This is another astonishingly unscientific diet plan. In a nutshell, it recommends a similar food plan and exercise regime for people of diverse ages and of different genders simply because they have the same blood type. There is no credible basis for this idea. All meal plans and exercise programs should be specific to the individual depending on age, sex, height, weight and lifestyle.

Here's another one: the *Protein Power* diet. *Protein Power* has no valid research proving its safety or benefit, and worse, compelling data strongly demonstrates kidney damage with this type of diet.

One last mention: *Dr. Bob Ariot's Revolutionary Weight Control*. This one claims the harder the food, the harder the body will be. And if you believe that, I have some swamp land in Florida to sell you.

Remember, too much of anything is not a good thing. For instance, studies show eating too many carbohydrates will raise triglycerides, lower HDL (good cholesterol), and cause LDL (bad cholesterol) to become small and dense, which increases your risk for heart disease.

So, what truth can you hold on to when improving your diet?

Here's the answer: go back to the basics: variety, moderation and balance. Do your own research and discuss the pros and cons with your dietitian.

Enjoy your food!