



Diet dilemma

DiETING has turned into a lucrative industry, with diet books particularly popular at this time of the year. We look at what some of these diets promise and whether they really work.

AT A GLANCE

Author credentials.

Fad or failure?

Detox or not?

Diet claims.

The beginning of a new year means a fresh start for many people following the Christmas excess. Brandy butter, Christmas pudding, mince pies and rich chocolates are some of the festive treats that contribute to the extra calories we consume, not to mention the empty calories provided by alcohol. Some people take more exercise to balance out the additional intake of energy but

others turn to fad diets for what they believe is a quick-fix. You may have come across friends or family members professing to be on the Atkins Diet, a very low carbohydrate diet; the Zone Diet, a genetics based diet; or the South Beach Diet, which is based on a low glycaemic-index (see 'The Glycaemic Index', *Consumer Choice*, February 2008, p78). Other popular diets include the

Perricone Diet, the Dean Ornish Diet and the long-standing Weight Watchers Diet... the list goes on. Dieting crazes tend to follow a cycle, and when one craze ends there is always another diet ready to become the next big thing.

Author credentials

Publishers know that for a diet book to become a bestseller the author has to be



credible and trusted by the reader. However, the writers are seldom the qualified dietitians or doctors that you might expect them to be. Many of them write a book and are then rolled out as an 'expert' despite having no recognisable credentials. Celebrities who have gained and lost a lot of weight often become successful authors of diet books because they are already in the public eye. They may provide inspiration for the average person hoping to lose weight easily. People expect to see results when they buy into quick-fix diets and usually judge the diet and make recommendations based on how quickly the pounds drop off. However they often

have unrealistic expectations, and may not realise that celebrities have personal trainers and dietitians at their beck and call. It is most important to look at an author's credentials and check whether there is scientific evidence to back up the diet before committing to it.

Call the doctor

Gillian McKeith, the presenter of the Channel 4 programme 'You Are What You Eat', was forced to drop the title 'Dr' from her company's advertising in 2007 following a complaint to the UK Advertising Standards Authority. Channel 4 originally described her as a 'clinical nutritionist' when the series started and

during the programmes she wore a doctor's lab coat whilst motivating members of the public to lose weight and change their lifestyle. However, it was found that the use of the title 'Doctor' was misleading, because her PhD was from a college not accredited by a recognised educational authority. It was, in fact, a qualification gained by a correspondence course from a non-accredited American college. Ms McKeith has nonetheless earned millions of pounds as a result of her books and health food spin-offs.

The British Dietetic Association (BDA, see *Useful contacts*) has in the past issued warnings that people were becoming ill from following the advice of untrained and unqualified diet doctors. If you or a member of your family needs dietary guidance it is better to seek help from a health professional rather than following a commercial weight loss programme. You can ask your doctor to recommend a dietician, or one can be found in hospitals, community practices, and in some cases, in private clinics.

Fad or failure?

When it comes to diet books, there is always a specific hook that makes the diet in question stand out from all the others. A diet may be seen as a 'fad' if it promises a quick fix, makes recommendations based on a single study, lists 'good' and 'bad' foods and/or recommends the elimination of one or more of the following major food groups:

- Starchy foods, such as rice, potatoes and whole-wheat pasta and bread.
- Fruit and vegetables.
- Meat, fish, eggs and beans.
- Milk and dairy foods.
- Foods containing fat and sugar.

Regardless of the criticism, fad diets normally mean good news for businesses, not least because many regimes require their followers to purchase books, supplements, vitamins, drinks, herbal teas, juicers and other spin-off products.

One of the most high-profile diets around is the 'Atkins' diet which was devised by Dr. Robert Atkins in the 1970s. This diet specifically focuses on a low-carbohydrate intake. 'Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution' was published in 1972 and was followed by a series of 17 books in total. Although 'Atkins' has endured much criticism down through the years the books still generate a high amount of revenue with more than 21 million copies

Useful contacts

Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute
Ashgrove House
Kill Avenue
Dun Laoghaire
Co. Dublin
email info@indi.ie
www.indi.ie

American Cancer Society ACS
www.cancer.org

British Dietetic Association BDA
www.bda.uk.com

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center
www.bidmc.org

having been sold to date. We decided to take a look at some of the most popular diets and what they involve.

The Atkins Diet

This regime is based on the premise that "when you eat too many carbohydrates (carbs), your body burns some of those for energy and stores the excess carbs as fat. When you eat fewer carbs - especially white flour and sugar, your body begins burning fat as its primary fuel source." The plan has four phases. The first of these is 'Induction' during which one's carbohydrate (carbs) intake is significantly reduced. The focus is on eating lean protein such as chicken, fish, lean cuts of beef and eggs and fats particularly olive oil. Those following the diet are told to avoid potatoes, bread, pasta, and grains as well as fruit and nuts. Carb sources are mainly from salad and vegetables which are low in starch. Atkins famously told his followers "stick with Induction and you can lose up to 15lb in two weeks." He claimed the weight loss came through 'ketosis', a metabolic state that arose when the body, lacking carbohydrates, burns fat for fuel.

Low-glycaemic-index diets (low-GI diets)

The glycaemic response is the rate at which our blood sugars rise and fall after consuming carbohydrates. The glycaemic index (GI) is a ranking system for carbohydrates and an indicator of the rate at which the glycaemic response occurs (see 'The glycaemic index', *Consumer Choice*, February 2008, p78). Foods can be classified as low, medium

or high GI. They can also be given a numerical ranking. This ranking system goes from zero to one hundred, where a low value indicates that the carbohydrate is converted into glucose slowly and raises blood sugars at a slower rate, and a high value indicates a quicker conversion of a carbohydrate into glucose. A low GI is 55 or less, medium GI between 56 and 69 and high GI over 70. The glycaemic index is not a new concept but lately it has gained attention because more and more weight loss plans are using it when marketing and advertising their diets.

The Perricone Diet

This programme was formulated by a dermatologist who claimed that his diet and regimen of supplements and lotions could make followers look younger and live longer. He says that the diet fights the inflammation that is caused by the bad food choices "directly responsible for wrinkles, degenerative diseases, and accelerated aging." The diet will apparently make you look younger in as little as three days. There is a long list of foods and drinks deemed unacceptable while on the diet and followers are recommended to take up to 25 supplements every day!

The South Beach Diet

Like the Zone, this diet focuses on the control of insulin levels, and also on the benefits of unrefined slow carbohydrates as opposed to refined carbohydrates that are digested more rapidly. The creator, Dr. Agatston, believed that low-fat and no-carbohydrate regimes were not effective over the long term. It is a low-

carbohydrate diet but does not ban carbohydrates like the Atkins diet. The book sold more than 14.5 million copies and took advantage of the backlash against diets which were seen as too low in carbohydrates by many of their critics.

The Zone Diet

This regime aims for a balance of 40% carbohydrates, 30% fats, and 30% protein at each meal. The diet focuses also on controlling insulin levels for successful weight loss and control. By keeping insulin levels within the therapeutic zone followers are said to be keeping in the 'Zone'. The creator of the diet, Dr. Barry Spears, claims to have taken into account our genetic makeup. He believes that humans are not programmed to consume large amounts of processed carbohydrates, in particular grains, and says that by following the diet we are consuming the fuel our bodies need for optimum health. Carbohydrates such as those in vegetables, lentils, beans, whole grains, and the majority of fruits are seen as favourable while those found in brown rice, pasta, dry breakfast cereal, bread, carrots and fruit juices are less favourable.

The jury is out

The long-term health effects of low-carbohydrate diets are unknown. However recent research has suggested that Atkin-style diets may damage arteries and increase the risk of heart attacks. A study led by a scientific team at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Centre (BIDMC, see *Useful contacts*) demonstrated that mice placed on a 12-week low-carbohydrate/high-protein diet showed a significant increase in atherosclerosis, which is a build-up of plaque in the arteries and a major cause of heart attack and stroke. The team are not certain of the cause but the study leader, Professor Anthony Rosenzweig, said that the results succeeded in getting him off the low-carb diet he had been following himself. The findings were published in the journal 'Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences'.

The bottom line is that although limiting your consumption of refined carbohydrates such as cake, biscuits and fizzy drinks is wise, a low-carbohydrate diet can be a high-risk option when it comes to health. The American Cancer Society (ACS, see *Useful contacts*) warns that low-carbohydrate dieters can fall into eating habits that may increase the

choice comment

It is easy to get carried away when we see magazines and TV programmes hyping up a particular diet and interviewing the stars who swear by it. They can make it seem like losing weight is easy and can be achieved in a matter of weeks. There is no evidence to prove that one way of eating is any more successful than another. The reality is that it can take as long as a year to lose weight and adapt to new healthy eating habits. You need to watch portion sizes, cut back on total calories and exercise more. This does not mean that you can't have a treat now and then, but simply do things in moderation.

One danger is that a diet may recommend consuming too few calories which may lead to nutritional deficiencies. Our advice is to avoid fad diets at all costs. If you eat a very restrictive diet for a short period of time you may originally lose weight quickly but then get fed up, start eating less healthy foods again and pile the pounds back on.

Cutting out an entire food group or existing solely on cabbage soup or grapefruit means you will lose out on vital nutrients and is dangerous. There are plenty of ways to clean up your diet without having to go on a fast. Give your body what it needs – a balanced diet, fluids, regular exercise, and sleep, because there really is no easy way out. Remember, you should not embark on a new diet if you suffer from an existing medical condition or are pregnant or breast-feeding. Consult a medical practitioner if in doubt.

risk of developing cancer later in life. Diets high in saturated fat increase the risk of prostate and colon cancer and restricting fruit and vegetables mean that you can miss out on disease-fighting nutrients and anti-oxidants that your body needs. Counting carbohydrates is not the key to good health. Adopt a lifestyle that can be sustained for life.

Detox or not?

Cleansing diets, fasting and 'detox' plans have been under the spotlight for years and are often advocated by various celebrities who follow strict regimes for a film role or in the lead up to an awards ceremony like the Oscars. The most stringent of these are liquid fasts which aim to 'cleanse' the body of toxins and help followers to drop weight in a very short period of time. The toxins referred to include chemicals in cosmetics, cleaning materials, pesticides, food additives, drugs, caffeine, alcohol, nicotine and refined sugar. You can buy over-the-counter herbal detox packs containing liver tonics, digestive aids and natural laxatives and diuretics. However our bodies are already naturally designed to detoxify and eliminate waste materials and by-products of chemical materials. The detoxification and elimination organs are the liver, lungs, kidneys, bowels, skin and lymph. Eating foods rich in fibre, including vegetables, fruits, whole grains and legumes will keep your bowel healthy and eliminate the need for so-called 'cleansing diets'.

A foot detox is another method of 'cleansing' the body that has recently become popular. A special type of adhesive pad is worn on the bottoms of the feet during sleep and is supposed to stimulate the outflow of toxins through the feet in order to be absorbed by the pad. The aim is to prevent waste building up and toxic substances being absorbed into the bloodstream. However, there is no scientific evidence that this method or indeed that any type of detox kit works. Many of the labels on detox products advise users to stop drinking alcohol and coffee and to eat healthily while taking them. This is much more likely to bring more benefits than the actual product itself. Consumers should follow this advice but save the money they would spend on the supplements. As long as we are sensible about what we eat and drink and take regular exercise, we are unlikely to get any extra benefits from a commercial detox programme.

TRUE OR FALSE?

Those of you who are interested in getting healthier in the New Year may come across the following commonly made claims – but are they to be believed? We take a look.



Myth: **Skipping breakfast saves calories**

Truth: Avoiding food in the morning in the attempt to keep your daily calorie intake down is not wise. Eating breakfast is vital because it kick-starts your metabolism after fasting all night. Skipping this meal might lead you to eat more later on in the day to compensate. There are other ways to reduce your overall calorie intake such as sharing a dessert after dinner instead of having it all yourself. One pound of fat contains 3,500 calories, so to lose 1lb a week you need a deficit of 500 calories a day. To maintain your body weight the calories you take in should be equal to the calories you burn off. This is why exercise is important.

Myth: **Eggs are unhealthy**

Truth: Nutrition guidelines state that an egg a day (seven eggs a week) is ok for healthy individuals and those on a cholesterol lowering diet can have four to six eggs a week. Many people avoid eggs because they contain cholesterol. However eggs contain what is known as 'good' cholesterol and we all need some blood cholesterol to build cells and make hormones. So get scrambling and enjoy eggs as part of a healthy diet.

Myth: **Eating after 6pm leads to weight gain**

Truth: Many diets tell you not to eat after a certain time in the evening. They say the body will store more fat because it is not burned off while you are asleep. However, a study at the Dunn Nutrition Centre in Cambridge suggests otherwise. Volunteers were placed in a whole body calorimeter, which measures calories burned and calories stored. They were fed with a large lunch and small evening meal for one test period, then a small lunch and large evening meal during a second test period. The results revealed the large meal eaten late at night did not make the body store more fat. So it is not the timing of your meals but the total amount you consume in a 24-hour period that is important to monitor.

Myth: **Drink at least eight glasses of water a day**

Truth: Adequate water consumption is vital but there is no scientific proof that absolutely everyone must 'drink at least eight glasses of water a day'. Since all of us have different physical needs, focusing on exact quantities is not very helpful. If you don't drink much water at the moment, start by having one or two extra glasses each day, then add another a few days later and so on. The key is balancing water consumption throughout the day. Remember that many foods, in particular fruits and vegetables also contain water. If your urine is pale yellow, this is a good indication but if it's a darker yellow, drink more water.

Myth: **Fat-free diets work**

Truth: Cutting out fat is a huge no-no. You should have a third of your calories coming from fat as the body needs it for energy, tissue repair and to transport vitamins A, D, E and K around the body. Cutting down on saturated fats and eating unsaturated fats, found in things like olive oil and avocados, is the best approach to take. And remember 'low-fat' or 'fat-free' on the label doesn't necessarily mean low calorie or calorie-free - extra sugar is often added to boost the flavour of the product. If sugar is not burnt off then it is stored as fat.