

Weight-Loss Rules to Rethink



Forget what you've been told. Forget what you think you know. Start breaking the rules, and you might just start making some headway.

Let's see now. Are carbs the source of all dietary evil – or is it fat? Is dairy supposed to be good for weight loss these days, or bad? Is protein's day in the sun over, or just beginning? And should you be eating and exercising according to your blood type or your Ayurvedic dosha, or just strictly counting calories?

If you feel confused or clueless, it's no wonder. Every season brings a new weight-loss trend. Infomercials on diet supplements and exercise gadgets promise to help shed unwanted pounds, and we're bombarded daily with diet and exercise tips – from folk wisdom to the latest medical research – which often seem contradictory or incomplete. With so much weight-loss advice to wade through, many folks simply throw up their hands in despair and decide that they might as well sit on the couch and eat whatever they like.

No surprise, then, that we just keep getting fatter: Nearly 65 percent of Americans are either overweight or obese. And the more obese our nation becomes, the greater our collective risk for many deadly and costly diseases, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and breast, colon and prostate cancers – to name just a few.

That's the bad news. The good news is that we are not powerless. We needn't let our lack of knowledge about nutrition and fitness prevail over our common sense and our desire to live healthy, happy lives. We do, however, need to rethink what we think we know about dropping pounds and keeping them off.

For starters, we can forget about finding instant fixes and miracle cures for what are essentially pathological lifestyle habits. "We must stop falling for the myths that keep us fat and perpetuate an endless cycle of weight loss and gain," says Mark Hyman, MD, former long-time co-medical director at Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires, and current editor in chief of the journal *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*.

As much as we all might like the idea of a "magic bullet," most experts agree with Hyman that healthy, sustainable weight loss doesn't come from extreme measures or single-faceted diets. Nor does it come from relying on heavily marketed low-fat or low-carb foods and diet drinks (which, in fact, have been shown to hinder weight-loss efforts by messing up metabolism, contributing to cravings and undermining energy levels).

If you really want to lose excess weight and keep it off (or if you just want to maintain your current weight and stay healthy for the long haul), start by putting aside any worries about your love handles or saddlebags. Instead, start focusing on the space between your ears. Any weight-loss misconceptions or misinformation harbored there could present a real danger to your weight-management success.

Fortunately, rooting out these wrong-headed notions isn't as daunting as it might seem. It just means sorting through the tangle of mixed messages to discover what's wise, what's real, what's helpful – and what's not.

To make that effort easier, we've identified some of the most common weight-loss myths and mistakes and rewritten them in ways that we hope will help you make informed and empowered weight-management decisions going forward.

Think you know everything there is to know about weight loss? Maybe it's time to think again.

Old rule: A calorie is a calorie.

New rule: All calories are not created equal.

It is true that if you take in more calories than you burn, you will gain weight. But it's also true that the nutritional quality of those calories plays a big role in how many calories your body burns. So if you're simply counting calories without looking at the nutritional value of what you're eating, you're asking for trouble.

Why? Because our bodies require a consistent balance of healthy macronutrients (complex carbs, high-quality proteins and healthy fats), as well as micronutrients (vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, phytochemicals), plus adequate enzymes, fiber, water, and so on in order to function optimally. When we don't get these things, our energy levels drop, our hormones and neurotransmitters get imbalanced, and our metabolism stops working efficiently. We simply aren't as healthy as we should be, and our bodies don't regulate much of anything (including our weight and body composition) as well as they are designed to.

The health of our metabolism – the machinery that dictates how we burn fat and produce muscle – requires whole, "real" foods and the complex, synergistic blend of nutrients they contain in order to function properly. This is why replacing whole foods with "diet" fare (or foods selected exclusively on the basis of their low-calorie, low-carb, high-protein or low-fat characteristics) tends to work against long-term weight-management goals.

In his new book, *UltraMetabolism: The Simple Plan for Automatic Weight Loss* (Scribner, 2006), Hyman explains that the human metabolism, forged thousands of years ago, is hard-wired to process whole foods – the only foods our primitive ancestors had available. Technological advances have given us refined flours, processed sugars, fake fats, artificial flavors and more, he notes, but our bodies don't recognize these foods as viable sources of nutrients. Worse, by acting as toxins, pro-inflammatories and immune suppressors in our system, they can actively interfere with our weight-loss efforts – the classic rebound weight gain.

A healthy whole-foods diet (one that includes a balance of unprocessed carbs, fats and proteins) will also naturally tend to offer a relatively low glycemic load (GL) and a high phytonutrient index (PI) – precisely the kind of diet that Hyman and other nutritionally inclined weight-loss experts recommend.

A low-GL meal slows the rate at which carbs turn to sugar in the bloodstream. And this "slow burn" allows your body to digest sugars, says Hyman, "without triggering the metabolic signals that promote hunger and weight gain." Phytonutrients, meanwhile, act as powerful healing agents and metabolic regulators in the body.

"These compounds take part in all sorts of complex health-promoting processes," says nutrition specialist Rebecca Schauer, RD, LD.

To make the most of the calories you ingest, emphasize foods and food combinations with a low GL and a high PI, including vegetables, fruits, beans, nuts, seeds, olive oil, whole grains, teas, herbs and spices. Say no to diet plans that put concerns with caloric intake above concerns for whole-body health and vitality.

Old rule: To lose weight, go on a diet.

New rule: To lose weight, choose to eat healthy.

Many weight-loss diets call for a dramatic reduction in daily caloric intake, which tends to deprive the body of the very nutrients it needs to effectively release and process unwanted fat. But eating too little or skipping meals has another extreme downside: It puts the body in a starvation-like "fat-conservation" mode.

When you take in fewer calories than are necessary to fuel your resting metabolic rate (the base amount of caloric energy your body requires while at rest), your body simply compensates by reducing your metabolic rate. Goodbye, caloric burn.

"Your body thinks it's starving to death," explains Hyman. As a result, it not only cuts back on the energy you need to exercise and move about, it also "sets off chemical processes inside you that force you to eat more." Net result: weight gain.

You can get a very rough estimate of your resting metabolic rate, says Hyman, by multiplying your weight in pounds by 10 (if you weigh 150 pounds, for example, your resting metabolic rate would be approximately 1,500 calories per day). "If you eat less than that amount, your body will instantly perceive danger and turn on the alarm system that protects you from starvation and slows your metabolism," says Hyman.

The deprivation mindset of dieting – characterized by "just until I lose this weight" thinking – is another enemy of weight loss. It causes us to alternate between extremes of "on the diet" and "off the diet" behavior. That sets us up to have an unhealthy relationship with food that can turn weight management into a miserable, lifelong struggle. A better approach: Decide to eat healthy for life. Enjoy delicious, high-quality foods in ways that nurture your body and your senses for the long haul.

Old rule: Eating fat will make you fat.

New rule: Good fats are your friend.

People have been holding forth on the evils of fat for so long now that many of us can't indulge in something other than a low-fat yogurt or a couple of Snackwell's cookies without feeling a Pavlovian sting of guilt. But avoiding fats is a mistake, according to biochemist and nutritionist Mary Enig, PhD, and nutrition researcher Sally Fallon, authors of *Eat Fat, Lose Fat* (Hudson Street Press, 2005). In fact, taking in an adequate supply of healthy fats is essential to proper body composition, whole-body health and long-term weight management.

One of the keys to losing weight, Enig and Fallon assert, is to understand the differences between bad fats (notably trans fats and rancid fats, found in most processed foods) and good fats (including monounsaturated fats, like those found in nuts, seeds and fish. They also advise eating small to moderate amounts of saturated fat, the kind found in real butter, cream, grass-fed meats and virgin coconut oil). Enig and Fallon recognize that it can seem counterintuitive that our bodies need fat in order to burn fat, but they say – and a great many other notable nutrition experts agree – that we must get over our fear of good fats if our bodies are to function properly.

Your body needs not only the much-touted omega-3 fats, they say, but also some plant-based omega-6s and a certain amount of the much-maligned saturated fat, in order to nourish your brain, heart, nerves, hormones and cell structures.

Fail to get these fats, assert Enig and Fallon, and both your health and weight-loss efforts will suffer for it: "Your energy drops, your nerves don't fire efficiently, glands malfunction,

your hormones and metabolism head south," they explain. "With cells weakened from lack of necessary nutrition, weight loss is an uphill battle."

While eating an excessive amount of any kind of fat will compromise bodily function and lead to weight gain, Enig and Fallon note, eating a moderate amount of the good fats found in whole foods not only helps our bodies stay healthy and vibrant, it also delivers the benefit of controlling blood-sugar levels and appetite, both of which have a direct impact on successful weight loss and maintenance.

Most nutrition experts suggest taking in between 15 and 25 percent of your daily calories as fat. Be vigilant about including it in the form of nutritious, whole foods (think avocados, nuts, fish), healthy oils (cold-pressed olive, seed, nut) and small-scale saturated-fat indulgences (real butter and cream, grass-fed meats, coconut, etc.), and you'll get all of fat's weight-management benefits – without compromising your waistline. You'll also find it easier to say no to fatty processed foods and other unhealthy indulgences of all kinds.

Old rule: Exercise to burn calories.

New rule: Exercise to build fitness – and burn more calories with ease.

Yes, exercise burns calories, and burning calories can help you lose weight. But exercising for improved fitness has many weight-loss benefits that go beyond per-session caloric burn. Understanding this can make a huge difference in how you approach your exercise routine.

For one thing, being fit gives you a distinct metabolic advantage at a cellular level. Fit people have a greater number of mitochondria within their cells. Mitochondria are organelles (like mini-organs) that contain important enzymes associated with aerobic energy production. In fact, they are often referred to as "cellular power plants," because they are our cells' primary means for producing energy from food.

Mitochondria also handle the aerobic oxidation of fatty acids (fat burning!) that occurs even when we're at rest. Thus, increasing mitochondrial mass through exercise helps raise our metabolism so we burn more calories – not only with every exercise session, but also when we're not exercising at all.

Performed at the proper intensities and intervals, both cardio training and resistance training can help to build lean muscle mass, to increase mitochondrial function and, in turn, to increase metabolic rate.

Fitness-focused exercise also improves your strength and endurance, which makes activities of all kinds easier, and thus encourages you to be more active overall. And, since regular exercise also improves your energy level, confidence, emotional outlook and self-esteem, it can help you get through weight-loss plateaus when you're not seeing the inches melt off as quickly as you'd like.

"The most popular benefit of exercise is weight control, but it also clears the mind," says Steven Aldana, PhD, professor of exercise science at Brigham Young University and author of the recent book *The Culprit and the Cure: Why Lifestyle Is the Culprit Behind America's Poor Health and How Transforming That Lifestyle Can Be the Cure* (Maple Mountain, 2005). "It gives you time to think in different ways, which helps you be more creative. It's also a common treatment for sleep disorders." And this promotes a healthy cycle: When you feel more relaxed, resilient, rested and in control, you have more available energy and internal resources to devote to your weight-loss goals.

Body-mind fitness approaches (like yoga, Pilates and tai chi) can also be helpful in creating a more self-respecting, self-aware mindset that supports healthy lifestyle goals. Caloric formulas fail to consider any of these benefits. But you shouldn't!

The key to getting the most out of exercise, many experts say, is to include a balance of cardio, strength and flexibility activities that you enjoy, and to keep your heart rate within its optimal "training zone" while working out.

No exercise program is one-size-fits-all, so take time to figure out what is most effective for you.

Old rule: Weight loss is about changing your body.

New rule: Weight loss is about changing your life.

Maintaining a healthy weight involves both nutrition and fitness components, but very few chronic weight challenges originate exclusively in those domains, and neither do their solutions. "Weight loss starts with the brain, not the belly," says psychotherapist Doris Wild Helmering, MSW, coauthor of *Think Thin, Be Thin: 101 Psychological Ways to Lose Weight* (Broadway, 2005).

For many people, achieving a healthy weight is only possible once certain mental and emotional issues have been addressed. Why? Because many of us overeat or avoid exercise for reasons we don't entirely understand – or that we feel powerless to control.

Maybe we make poor choices when we're stressed out, sad, ashamed or angry. Maybe we make unconscious choices when we're tired, distracted or numbed out. Whatever the reason, says Wild Helmering, the excess weight we carry on the outside is sometimes the symptom of an unresolved problem on the inside.

In such cases, the first step is to turn inward and ask yourself some questions. "'What am I really hungry for?' Perhaps you need a hug or a word of encouragement from a friend instead of that piece of leftover chocolate pie in the refrigerator," she says. Perhaps you need to bust out of a stressful job track, a destructive relationship or a self-abusive attitude in order to make your personal health and well-being a priority.

It's worth noting that stress alone can create a biochemical profile that's antithetical to weight loss. When we experience stress, whether or not we are in immediate physical danger, our physiological "fight-or-flight" survival responses kick in – and they set off a series of chemical reactions in our bodies that encourage weight retention.

So, building self-awareness and self-acceptance, regularly incorporating healthy stress-management techniques, or simply talking things through with trusted friends or loved ones could be as central to weight loss as hitting the treadmill.

In the end, says Aldana, if we don't have psychological health, we simply won't have the drive to lose weight – or to keep it off. "If you are unhappy," he says, "you are not likely to care much about your physical health or body weight."

By now you've probably noticed that all these updated rules turn on one central notion: that losing weight isn't simply about any one diet or exercise regimen – it's about transforming the way we live. It's also about adjusting the widespread and mistaken

assumptions about weight loss that have kept us stuck in unhealthy patterns – patterns that have done our entire culture a great deal more harm than good.

Another key take-away: No single weight-loss approach is right for everyone. Every body, and every life, is different. And so, in the end, there are no hard-and-fast "rules" – only principles, evidence and guidelines that each of us must explore and refine until we find the mix that's right for us.

Perhaps that's the very best part. Eventually – once we've tried enough "miracle" diets, and once we've started and stopped enough "surefire" exercise routines – the wisest among us settle into the kinds of stable-yet-evolving routines that bring real and lasting results.

Over time, we discover that the real rewards of healthy weight management lie in thinking and experimenting for ourselves, in doing it all for the right reasons, and in making the rules up as we go.

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SIDEBAR: The Secrets to Successful – and Sustainable – Weight Loss

Focus on health and fitness first, weight second. The healthier you are, the easier weight loss becomes. And if you lose weight at the expense of your health, you're unlikely to keep it off.

Set realistic goals. Say no to extreme, fad and quick-fix diets. Create sustainable habits that can last a lifetime. Start where you are and make gradual changes. Take pride in your progress, learn as you go and, most important, take slip-ups and setbacks in stride. Every so-called failure is really just feedback about what doesn't work for you.

Pay attention to the details. Notice when you are triggered to overeat or skip workouts. Observe the impact certain foods have on your energy, digestion, water retention, etc. Start reading labels on everything you buy – coffee creamers, sauces – in order to suss out toxins like trans fats (hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated oils), artificial sweeteners and flavors, and blood-sugar-spiking sugars (e.g., high-fructose corn syrup).

Say "no" to big portions. Keep in mind that the average adult stomach has only about a 1-quart capacity, so eating a platter-size meal makes no sense. Overstuffing also impedes digestion and gives your body more calories than it can put to good use at one time. If you've got a big appetite, start your meal with a large vegetable salad.

Change your life and your body will follow. Even small steps – like drinking more water, walking around the block in the morning or refusing to eat while watching TV – can start you in the right direction.

Remember, weight loss is individual. We all have different bodies and different metabolisms. So don't fret if your best friend seems to be shedding weight at a faster rate. Just keep your eyes on the prize: healthy weight loss and whole-body vitality that lasts. If you're not getting good results from your current efforts, seek expertise from a qualified health, nutrition or fitness expert.

Resources

BOOKS

UltraMetabolism: The Simple Plan for Automatic Weight Loss by Mark Hyman, MD (Scribner, 2006)

Eat Fat, Lose Fat by Mary Enig, PhD, and Sally Fallon (Hudson Street Press, 2005)

The Culprit and the Cure: Why Lifestyle Is the Culprit Behind America's Poor Health and How Transforming That Lifestyle Can Be the Cure by Steven Aldana, PhD (Maple Mountain, 2005)

Think Thin, Be Thin: 101 Psychological Ways to Lose Weight by Doris Wild Helmering and Dianne Hales (Broadway, 2005)

American Heart Association No-Fad Diet: A Personal Plan for Healthy Weight Loss by the American Heart Association (Clarkson Potter, 2005)

French Women Don't Get Fat: The Secret of Eating for Pleasure by Mireille Guiliano (Knopf, 2005)

WEB

Medline Plus: Weight Control – www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/weightcontrol.html

Mayo Clinic Weight Loss Center – www.mayoclinic.com/health/weightloss/WT99999