Weight-loss and Nutrition Myths

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

NIH National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

WIN *Weight-control Information Network*

"Lose 30 pounds in 30 days!"

"Eat as much as you want and still lose weight!"

"Try the thigh buster and lose inches fast!"

Have you heard these claims before? A large number of diets and tools are available, but their quality may vary. It can be hard to know what to believe.

This fact sheet may help. Here, we discuss myths and provide facts and tips about weight loss, nutrition, and physical activity. This information may help you make healthy changes in your daily habits. You can also talk to your health care provider. She or he can help you if you have other questions or you want to lose weight. A registered dietitian may also give you advice on a healthy eating plan and safe ways to lose weight and keep it off.

Weight-loss and Diet Myths

Myth: Fad diets will help me lose weight and keep it off.

Fact: Fad diets are not the best way to lose weight and keep it off. These diets often promise quick weight loss if you strictly reduce what you eat or avoid some types of foods. Some of these diets may help you lose weight at first. But these diets are hard to follow. Most people quickly get tired of them and regain any lost weight.

Fad diets may be unhealthy. They may not provide all of the nutrients your body needs. Also, losing more than 3 pounds a week after the first few weeks may increase your chances of developing gallstones (solid matter in the gallbladder that can cause pain). Being on a diet of fewer than 800 calories a day for a long time may lead to serious heart problems.

Healthy habits may help you lose weight.

- **Make healthy food choices.** Half of your plate should be fruits and veggies.
- **Eat small portions.** Use a smaller plate, weigh portions on a scale, or check the Nutrition Facts label for details about serving sizes (see page 3).
- **Build exercise into your daily life.** Garden, go for family walks, play a pickup game of sports, start a dance club with your friends, swim, take the stairs, or walk to the grocery store or work.

Combined, these habits may be a safe, healthy way to lose weight and keep it off.

TIP: Research suggests that safe weight loss involves combining a reduced-calorie diet with physical activity to lose 1/2 to 2 pounds a week (after the first few weeks of weight loss). Make healthy food choices. Eat small portions. Build exercise into your daily life. Combined, these habits may be a healthy way to lose weight and keep it off. These habits may also lower your chances of developing heart disease, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes.

Myth: Carbs are fattening. I should limit them when trying to lose weight.

Fact: Carbohydrates (carbs) are the body's main source of fuel for energy. You don't have to limit all carbs to lose weight. There are two main types of carbs: simple carbs (sugars) and complex carbs (starches and fiber). Foods that are high in complex carbs—like fruits, veggies, and whole grains—provide a healthy supply of fiber, minerals, and vitamins. But simple carbs from cake, candy, cookies, and sugar-sweetened desserts and drinks (including alcohol) have many calories and few nutrients.

Government dietary guidelines advise eating plenty of unrefined grains, like brown rice and whole-wheat bread, cereal, and pasta. They also suggest that fruit and veggies should make up half of what is on your plate. The Resources section at the end of this fact sheet offers helpful links to these guidelines and the ChooseMyPlate website, which provides information, tips, and tools on healthy eating.

TIP: To lose weight, reduce the number of calories you take in and increase the amount of physical activity you do each day. Create a healthy eating plan that mixes carbs, fat, and protein:

- Eat a mix of fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products, fruits, veggies, and whole grains.
- Limit added sugars, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and saturated fat.
- Eat low-fat protein: beans, eggs, fish, lean meats, nuts, and poultry.

Meal Myths

Myth: Some people can eat whatever they want and still lose weight.

Fact: To lose weight, you need to burn more calories than you eat and drink. Some people may seem to get away with eating any kind of food they want and still lose weight. But those people, like everyone, must use more energy than they take in through food and drink to lose weight.

A number of factors such as your age, genes, medicines, and lifestyle habits may affect your weight. If you would like to lose weight, speak with your health care provider about factors that may affect your weight. Together, you may be able to create a plan to help you reach your weight and health goals.

Eat the rainbow!

When making half of your plate fruits and veggies, choose foods with vibrant colors that are packed with fiber, minerals, and vitamins.

- **Red**: bell peppers, cherries, cranberries, onions, red beets, strawberries, tomatoes, watermelon
- **Green**: avocado, broccoli, cabbage, cucumber, dark lettuce, grapes, honeydew, kale, kiwi, spinach, zucchini
- **Orange and yellow**: apricots, bananas, carrots, mangoes, oranges, peaches, squash, sweet potatoes
- **Blue and purple**: blackberries, blueberries, grapes, plums, purple cabbage, purple carrots, purple potatoes

For more tips on healthy eating, see the Resources section for helpful links to federally approved dietary guidelines and MyPlate.

TIP: When trying to lose weight, you can still eat your favorite foods as part of a healthy eating plan. But you must watch the **total number of calories** that you eat. Reduce your portion sizes (see the sidebar to understand portions and servings). Find ways to limit the calories in your favorite foods. For example, you can bake foods rather than frying them. Use low-fat milk in place of cream. Make half of your plate fruits and veggies.

What is the difference between a serving and a portion?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Nutrition Facts label appears on most packaged foods (see Figure 1). It tells you how many calories and servings are in a box or can. The serving size varies from product to product.

A portion is how much food you choose to eat at one time, whether in a restaurant, from a package, or at home. Sometimes the serving size and portion size match; sometimes they do not.

You can use the Nutrition Facts label

- to track your calorie intake and number of servings
- to make healthy food choices by serving smaller portions and selecting items lower in fats, salt, and sugar and higher in fiber and vitamins

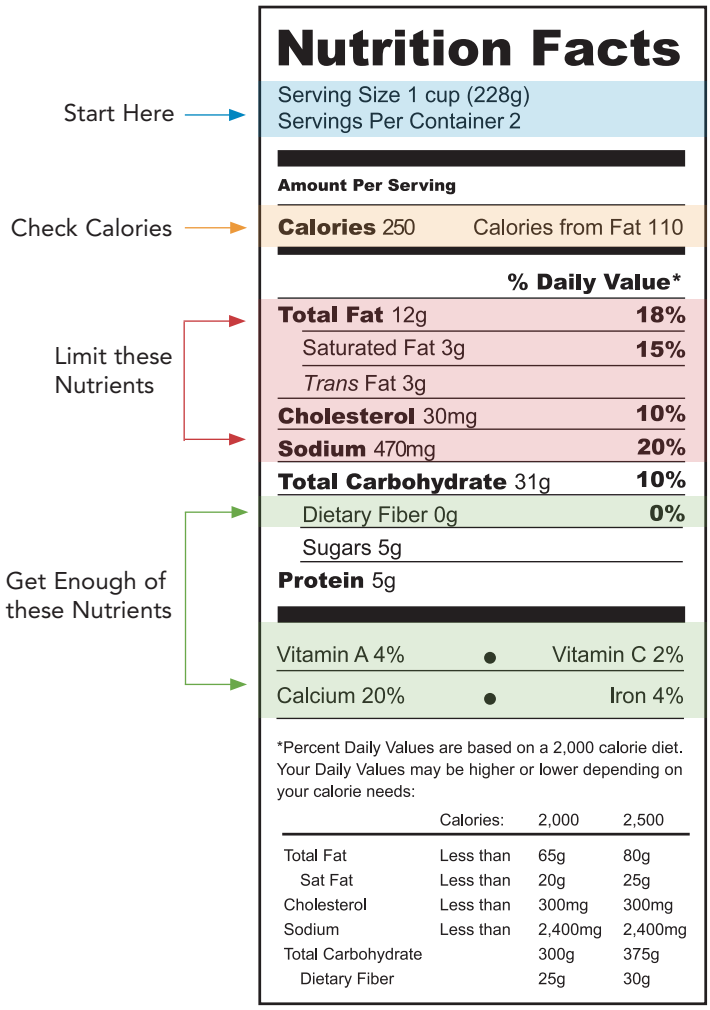
For more guidance on reading food labels, check out the web page *How to Use and Understand the Nutrition Facts Label* listed under Resources.

Myth: "Low-fat" or "fat-free" means no calories.

Fact: A serving of low-fat or fat-free food may be lower in calories than a serving of the full-fat product. But many processed low-fat or fat-free foods have just as many calories as the full-fat versions of the same foods—or even more calories. These foods may contain added flour, salt, starch, or sugar to improve flavor and texture after fat is removed. These items add calories.

TIP: Read the Nutrition Facts (see Figure 1) on a food package to find out how many calories are in a serving. Check the serving size, too–it may be less than you are used to eating.

FIGURE 1. Nutrition Facts Label



Adapted from ***http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm.***

Myth: Fast foods are always an unhealthy choice. You should not eat them when dieting.

Fact: Many fast foods are unhealthy and may affect weight gain. However, if you do eat fast food, choose menu options with care. Both at home and away, choose healthy foods that are nutrient rich, low in calories, and small in portion size.

TIP: To choose healthy, low-calorie options, check the nutrition facts. These are often offered on the menu or on restaurant websites. And know that the nutrition facts often do not include sauces and extras. Try these tips:

- Avoid "value" combo meals, which tend to have more calories than you need in one meal.
- Choose fresh fruit items or nonfat yogurt for dessert.
- Limit your use of toppings that are high in fat and calories, like bacon, cheese, regular mayonnaise, salad dressings, and tartar sauce.
- Pick steamed or baked items over fried ones.
- Sip on water or fat-free milk instead of soda.

Myth: If I skip meals, I can lose weight.

Fact: Skipping meals may make you feel hungrier and lead you to eat more than you normally would at your next meal. In particular, studies show a link between skipping breakfast and obesity. People who skip breakfast tend to be heavier than people who eat a healthy breakfast.

TIP: Choose meals and snacks that include a variety of healthy foods. Try these examples:

- For a quick breakfast, make oatmeal with low-fat milk, topped with fresh berries. Or eat a slice of whole-wheat toast with fruit spread.
- Pack a healthy lunch each night, so you won't be tempted to rush out of the house in the morning without one.
- For healthy nibbles, pack a small low-fat yogurt, a couple of whole-wheat crackers with peanut butter, or veggies with hummus.

For more on healthy eating, read our brochure *Better Health and You: Tips for Adults*. (See the Resources section for links to this and other WIN publications.)

Myth: Eating healthy food costs too much.

Fact: Eating better does not have to cost a lot of money. Many people think that fresh foods are healthier than canned or frozen ones. For example, some people think that spinach is better for you raw than frozen or canned. However, canned or frozen fruits and veggies provide as many nutrients as fresh ones, at a lower cost. Healthy options include low-salt canned veggies and fruit canned in its own juice or water-packed. Remember to rinse canned veggies to remove excess salt. Also, some canned seafood, like tuna, is easy to keep on the shelf, healthy, and low-cost. And canned, dried, or frozen beans, lentils, and peas are also healthy sources of protein that are easy on the wallet.

TIP: Check the nutrition facts on canned, dried, and frozen items. Look for items that are high in calcium, fiber, potassium, protein, and vitamin D. Also check for items that are low in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. For more tips, see *Smart Shopping for Veggies and Fruits* and *Healthy Eating on a Budget*, both on the MyPlate website (see the Resources section).

Physical Activity Myths

Myth: Lifting weights is not a good way to lose weight because it will make me "bulk up."

Fact: Lifting weights or doing activities like push-ups and crunches on a regular basis can help you build strong muscles, which can help you burn more calories. To strengthen muscles, you can lift weights, use large rubber bands (resistance bands), do push-ups or sit-ups, or do household or yard tasks that make you lift or dig. Doing strengthening activities 2 or 3 days a week will not "bulk you up." Only intense strength training, along with certain genetics, can build large muscles.

TIP: Government guidelines for physical activity recommend that adults should do activities at least 2 times a week to strengthen muscles. The guidelines also suggest that adults should get 150 to 300 minutes of moderately intense or vigorous aerobic activity each week–like brisk walking or biking. Aerobic activity makes you sweat and breathe faster.

For more on the benefits of physical activity and tips on how to be more active, check out the Government's guidelines for physical activity (see the Resources section for a link).

Myth: Physical activity only counts if I can do it for long periods of time.

Fact: You do not need to be active for long periods to achieve your 150 to 300 minutes of activity each week. Experts advise doing aerobic activity for periods of 10 minutes or longer at a time. You can spread these sessions out over the week.

TIP: Plan to do at least 10 minutes of physical activity three times a day on 5 or more days a week. This will help you meet the 150-minute goal. While at work, take a brief walking break. Use the stairs. Get off the bus one stop early. Go dancing with friends. Whether for a short or long period, bursts of activity may add up to the total amount of physical activity you need each week.

Don't just sit there!

Americans spend a lot of time sitting in front of computers, desks, hand-held devices, and TVs. Break up your day by moving around more and getting regular aerobic activity that makes you sweat and breathe faster.

- **Get 150 to 300 minutes of moderately intense or vigorous physical activity each week.** Basketball, brisk walks, hikes, hula hoops, runs, soccer, tennis–choose whatever you enjoy best! Even 10 minutes of activity at a time can add up over the week.
- **Strengthen your muscles at least twice a week.** Do push-ups or pull-ups, lift weights, do heavy gardening, or work with rubber resistance bands.

Food Myths

Myth: Eating meat is bad for my health and makes it harder to lose weight.

Fact: Eating lean meat in small amounts can be part of a healthy plan to lose weight. Chicken, fish, pork, and red meat contain some cholesterol and saturated fat. But they also contain healthy nutrients like iron, protein, and zinc.

TIP: Choose cuts of meat that are lower in fat, and trim off all the fat you can see. Meats that are lower in fat include chicken breast, pork loin and beef round steak, flank steak, and extra lean ground beef. Also, watch portion size. Try to eat meat or poultry in portions of 3 ounces or less. Three ounces is about the size of a deck of cards.

Myth: Dairy products are fattening and unhealthy.

Fact: Fat-free and low-fat cheese, milk, and yogurt are just as healthy as whole-milk dairy products, and they are lower in fat and calories. Dairy products offer protein to build muscles and help organs work well, and calcium to strengthen bones. Most milk and some yogurts have extra vitamin D added to help your body use calcium. Most Americans don't get enough calcium and vitamin D. Dairy is an easy way to get more of these nutrients.

TIP: Based on Government guidelines, you should try to have 3 cups a day of fat-free or low-fat milk or milk products. This can include soy beverages fortified with vitamins. If you can't digest lactose (the sugar found in dairy products), choose lactose-free or low-lactose dairy products or other foods and drinks that have calcium and vitamin D:

- Calcium: soy-based drinks or tofu made with calcium sulfate; canned salmon; dark leafy greens like collards or kale
- Vitamin D: cereals or soy-based drinks

More questions?

If you do not know whether or not to believe a weight-loss or nutrition claim, check it out! The Federal Trade Commission has information on false weight-loss claims in ads.

You can also find out more about nutrition and weight loss by talking with a registered dietitian through the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. See the Resources section for links.

Myth: "Going vegetarian" will help me lose weight and be healthier.

Fact: Research shows that people who follow a vegetarian eating plan, on average, eat fewer calories and less fat than non-vegetarians. Some research has found that vegetarian-style eating patterns are associated with lower levels of obesity, lower blood pressure, and a reduced risk of heart disease. Vegetarians also tend to have lower body mass index (BMI) scores than people with other eating plans. (The BMI measures body fat based on a person's height in relation to weight). But vegetarians—like others—can make food choices that impact weight gain, like eating large amounts of foods that are high in fat or calories or low in nutrients.

The types of vegetarian diets eaten in the United States can vary widely. Vegans do not consume any animal products, while lacto-ovo vegetarians eat milk and eggs along with plant foods. Some people have eating patterns that are mainly vegetarian but may include small amounts of meat, poultry, or seafood.

TIP: If you choose to follow a vegetarian eating plan, be sure you get enough of the nutrients that others usually take in from animal products like cheese, eggs, meat, and milk. Nutrients that may be lacking in a vegetarian diet are listed in the sidebar, along with foods and drinks that may help you meet your body's needs for these nutrients.

Nutrient	Common Sources
Calcium	dairy products, soy drinks with added calcium, tofu made with calcium sulfate, collard greens, kale, broccoli
Iron	cashews, spinach, lentils, chickpeas, bread or cereal with added iron
Protein	eggs, dairy products, beans, peas, nuts, seeds, tofu, tempeh, soy-based burgers
Vitamin B12	eggs, dairy products, fortified cereal or soy drinks, tempeh, miso (tempeh and miso are foods made from soybeans)
Vitamin D	foods and drinks with added vitamin D, including milk, soy drinks, or cereal
Zinc	whole grains (check the ingredients list on product labels for the words "whole" or "whole grain" before the grain ingredient's name), nuts, tofu, leafy greens (spinach, cabbage, lettuce)

Research

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) conducts and supports a broad range of basic and clinical obesity research. More information about obesity research is available at *http://www.obesityresearch.nih.gov*.

Participants in clinical trials can play a more active role in their own health care, gain access to new research treatments before they are widely available, and help others by contributing to medical research. For more information, visit *http://www.clinicaltrials.gov*.

Resources

Additional Reading from the Weight-control Information Network

The following materials are available from WIN at the phone and fax numbers and website listed in the sidebar under the WIN contact information.

- ***Better Health and You: Tips for Adults*** helps adults plan steps toward eating healthier foods and being more physically active.
- ***Changing Your Habits: Steps to Better Health*** guides readers through steps that can help them determine what "stage" they are in–how ready they are–to make healthy lifestyle changes. The fact sheet also offers strategies on how to make healthy eating and physical activity changes.
- ***Choosing a Safe and Successful Weight-loss Program*** provides a list of things to look for when choosing a safe and effective weight-loss program, as well as a list of questions to ask program providers.
- ***Tips to Help You Get Active*** offers ideas to beat some of the environmental, health-related, and personal roadblocks to making physical activity a part of one's regular routine.
- ***Weight Loss for Life*** discusses the benefits of weight loss and ways to develop healthy eating and physical activity plans. In addition, the differences between the two types of formal weight-loss programs–clinical and nonclinical–are discussed.

Additional Resources

- ***2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.*** These guidelines provide general information on physical activity, including how often you should be active and which activities are best for you. Visit *http://www.health.gov/PAGuidelines*.
- **Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.** To find a registered dietitian in your area, visit *http://www.eatright.org* or call 1–800–877–1600.
- ***Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010.*** You can find information and tips on healthy eating, shopping, and cooking online at *http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines*.
- **Federal Trade Commission.** Check out weight-loss claims in ads at *http://www.ftc.gov* or call 1–877–FTC–HELP (1–877–382–4357).
- ***Healthy Eating on a Budget.*** *http://www.choosemyplate.gov/healthy-eating-on-budget.html*
- ***How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label.*** This overview on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's website guides you in using the label to select healthy food for yourself and your family. Visit *http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm*.
- **MyPlate.** Information, tips, and interactive tools about healthy eating and physical activity, as well as healthy eating on a budget, are available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Visit the MyPlate website at *http://www.choosemyplate.gov*.
- ***Smart Shopping for Veggies and Fruits.*** *http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/downloads/TenTips/DGTipsheet9SmartShopping.pdf*

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The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) is a national information service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). WIN provides the general public, health professionals, and the media with science-based, up-to-date, culturally relevant materials and tips. Topics include healthy eating, barriers to physical activity, portion control, and eating and physical activity myths.

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http://www.SweetOnVeg.com
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This fact sheet is also available at *http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov*.

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