

quick results,” says Registered Dietitian Heidi McIndoo, MS, RD, author of *What to Eat When*, which was published this year. Plus, the interesting and mysterious “diet rules” are more exciting than the usual guidance to cut calories and exercise more. One of the wackiest diets with strict rules, McIndoo shares, is the 7-Day Diet. Dieters eat nothing but fruit on one day, vegetables on another, then fruit and vegetables on one day, bananas and milk the next and so on, she explains. This appeals to people looking for a plan that doesn’t require them to make many decisions and to people who are more comfortable taking the word of others over scientific evidence.

In many instances, people feel desperate to lose weight, says New York-based Registered Dietitian Keri Gans, MS, RD, author of *The Small Change Diet*, also published this year. Some overweight people feel stigmatized, and others fear obesity-related complications. The manufacturers of weight-loss supplements and programs and the authors of gimmicky books know this and appeal to these dieters’ insecurities and desperation. Add to that the chatter and support among Hollywood stars and it’s no wonder people embrace these unsafe and unsustainable plans.

Fad Diets Are Risky

Following a severely restricted diet puts anyone’s immune system at risk, explains Gans, but it’s even more of a concern for individuals with immune deficiency diseases. A good diet doesn’t eliminate whole food groups or saddle individuals with a long list of taboo foods that leave their bodies lacking vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids, antioxidants and more. Gaping holes in a diet leave gaping holes in the immune system. There is no supplement or diet aid that includes the thousands of important compounds available from a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains — regardless of the claims manufacturers make.

In addition to leaving individuals open to infections, extreme diets have a host of unwelcome side effects, including muscle loss. It’s not uncommon to lose some muscle when dieting, but the more drastic the diet, the more muscle one can expect to lose, and that can get in the way of physical activity, overall good health and remaining strong during aging.

Beauty also fades. Individuals’ skin may look dull and feel dry, and they may lose hair along with the weight. Hair requires protein, vitamins, minerals and fatty acids, so any unbalanced diet can damage the hair follicle. Additionally, very-low-calorie diets resulting in rapid

weight loss shock the body and cause a shift in hormones that trims the hair’s lifespan. The effect isn’t noticeable right away; shedding hair usually occurs several months after the offending diet begins and may continue for several months after the diet improves.

Those nutrient deficiencies and hormonal shifts may be responsible for a lack of efficiency at work and a few more spats at home, too. Poor concentration, irritability, disturbed sleep and fatigue all are common consequences of poor diet.

Gans also warns of gallstones. Rapid weight loss pushes too much cholesterol into bile, causing stones. The gallbladder fails to empty properly, as well, compounding the problem.

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Another risk is a financial one. Instead of throwing money away on questionable pills, potions and programs, individuals should invest some time, effort and money in the things that matter: wholesome food, help around the house to free up time for exercise and cooking, a meeting with a registered dietitian to develop a personalized plan, a gym membership and other reasonable steps.

Red Flags of Fads

There are no easy ways to lose weight. “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is,” warns Gans. Do a “gut check.” If it feels phony, find another diet plan. Use these tip-offs to spot a fad. Steer clear of a plan or product claiming any of the following:

- Eat all you want and lose weight without exercise: To lose weight, you must burn more calories than you consume.
- The program or product works for everyone: Just as some drugs don’t work for everyone, no diet plan or supplement will either. Diets should be individualized to the dieter’s preferences and medical history.
- Calories don’t count: Actually, they do count.
- Drop 10 pounds in one week: Healthful weight loss is about 1 to 2 pounds per week, perhaps a little more initially.
- The weight loss is permanent: Lasting weight loss requires permanent lifestyle changes, including balanced eating and regular exercise.

Additionally, watch out for programs that do any of the following:

- Bases claims on before-and-after photos and testimonials from dieters: Nutrition is a science, so be skeptical if the only “proof” is someone’s emotional story and air-brushed picture.
- Uses words like “breakthrough,” “secret formula” and “miraculous”: Magic bullets and secret cures for weight loss don’t exist. If there were easy ways to lose weight, everyone would know about it.
- Requires one to commit a large sum of money: Be skeptical of expensive, limited-time offers.
- Calls salespeople “health counselors” or “nutritionists”: Unfortunately, in many states, there are no legal definitions for these words, and anyone can claim to be a health counselor or nutritionist.
- Eliminates a large list of foods or whole food groups: Balance and variety are keys to good health, and diets that forbid a large number of foods are difficult to follow for very long.
- Claims to detoxify the body: The best natural cleanse is a diet rich in fiber, fruits, vegetables and water.
- Requires odd food combinations or has a long list of diet rules: The odder the plan is, the less sustainable it is. Once an individual quits following it, they’re likely to gain back the weight.

Some Popular Diets

Cabbage Soup Diet. Description: Individuals can eat as much as they like as long as they stick to the short list of allowed foods and eat two bowls of low-calorie cabbage soup each day. Weaknesses: It provides inadequate nutrition, it’s monotonous and it doesn’t lead to permanent lifestyle change.

Cookie Diet. Description: Along with a low-calorie dinner of about 5 ounces of meat and a large serving of vegetables, several high-fiber, high-protein cookies are eaten each day. Weaknesses: The cookies are used like Slim Fast and other meal replacements. Calorie intake is low to very low, it provides inadequate nutrition and it doesn’t lead to permanent lifestyle change. Furthermore, the emphasis on sweet foods might encourage the desire for more sweet foods.

Food combining. Some examples are Fit for Life, The New Beverly Hills Diet and Suzanne Somers’ Sumersizing. Description: They require that individuals eat specific combinations of foods, and other combinations are forbidden. For example, fruit must be eaten before other foods and not for dessert. Some plans prohibit mixing chicken with rice because they claim proteins and carbohydrates

shouldn’t be eaten together. Weaknesses: These diets have complex rules that are not based in science and are complicated to follow. The assumption that the digestive tract cannot process mixed foods is false. In fact, most individual foods are a mix of fat, protein and carbohydrate.

Gluten-free diet. Description: Avoid all foods that contain gluten, a protein in wheat, rye and barley. Individuals with gluten intolerance or celiac disease, an immune disorder affecting the GI tract, must follow a gluten-free diet. Weaknesses: Though critical for people with celiac disease, a gluten-free diet is not a weight-loss diet. A well-planned gluten-free diet is nutritionally adequate, but individuals who rely on gluten-free cookies and other highly processed foods to keep full will not meet their nutritional needs.

Low-carbohydrate diet. Some examples are Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution, The Dukan Diet, Protein Power and The Carbohydrate Addict’s Diet. Description: These plans are based on the premise that eating too many carbohydrates (such as fruits, milk, yogurt, grains, starches and many vegetables) causes obesity. Individuals are encouraged to eat all they’d like of meats, butter, cheese and some vegetables. Weaknesses: These diets provide inadequate nutrition, they are monotonous, they are high in saturated fat and they provide a low intake of the foods shown to help prevent chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease and diabetes. Some studies show that low-carbohydrate diets impair cognition.

Individuals should keep a record of what they eat, how much, where, when and how they feel while eating.

HCG Diet. Description: Dieters eat about 500 calories per day and take injections of hCG (human chorionic gonadotropin) — a hormone in the urine of pregnant women. Weaknesses: This diet is severely low in calories, provides inadequate nutrition, doesn’t lead to permanent lifestyle change and there are risks associated with any injection. Many experts question the safety of hormone injections.

Maple Syrup Diet. Description: This is promoted as a 10-day cleansing diet meant to rid the body of toxins while losing



10 to 20 pounds. The only food individuals are permitted to have is a beverage made of water, real maple syrup, lemon juice and cayenne pepper. Laxatives are taken while on the program, as well. Over the course of a day, individuals will consume 500 to 800 calories. Weaknesses: This diet is severely low in calories, provides inadequate nutrition, doesn't lead to permanent lifestyle change, and results in frequent trips to the bathroom and loss of "healthy" bacteria in the GI tract. The body cleanses itself through the liver, kidneys and GI tract, so it does not require a special diet to do so.

What the Experts Say

Write it down. Individuals should keep a record of what they eat, how much, where, when and how they feel while eating. This will enable them to be able to identify bad habits to change and those that simply need tweaking. "What is a food challenge for one person isn't necessarily a challenge for the next person, so a food diary allows you to craft your own personalized plan," says Indiana-based Registered Dietitian Marcia Crawford, MS, RD. The simple act of recording food intake improves eating habits too because individuals become accountable to themselves.

Slow down. People need to enjoy their food with all their senses. "Often, we are so on-the-go that we eat too quickly or eat while we are doing something else," says Rosanne Rust, MS, RD, LDN, co-author of *Calorie Counter Journal for Dummies*. People need to look at their food, take in the aroma, savor the flavor and notice the mouth feel. It's much easier to satisfy themselves with less quantity when

they actually notice and remember the eating experience.

Take baby steps. "Get lasting results with small steps," says Georgia Kostas, MPH, RD, author of *The Cooper Clinic Solution to the Diet Revolution*. "Take 50 calories off each of three meals or snacks," she suggests. Other smart steps: Decrease or eliminate soda, bake instead of fry, share a meal in a restaurant, eat dessert less often, remove poultry skin before eating, give up second helpings. Individuals can use their food record to help set goals. And they shouldn't forget exercise. "Add a 15- to 20-minute walk daily," urges Kostas. Be consistent, and, in time, the pounds fall. "The scale will follow our behaviors," explains Linda M. Gigliotti, MS, RD, CDE, program director at the University of California, Irvine, Weight Management Program.

Understand yourself. Being successful long-term requires individuals to understand what drives their behaviors. "Knowing *what* to do is the easy part," explains Washington-based Registered Dietitian Sally Hara, MS, RD, CSSD, CDE. "The difficult part is figuring out *why* we do what we know we shouldn't." Some self-reflection and a good review by individuals of their food record will help them with this.

Make a lifestyle change. Permanent weight loss requires permanent behavior changes. Before starting a new diet plan, individuals should ask themselves if they can accomplish those changes in a year, suggests Elisa Zied, MS, RD, CDN, author of *Nutrition at Your Fingertips*. If there are so many difficult rules to follow, it's clearly not the right program.

Get the facts. "Go to reputable sites like the www.mypyramid.gov," urges Registered Dietitian and Food Safety Consultant Toby Amidor. The American Dietetic Association (ADA) at www.eatright.org has a registered dietitian locator. A registered dietitian can answer individuals' questions, help them assess their current diet and devise a plan just for them. Additionally, the ADA shares the pros and cons of popular diet books (www.eatright.org/Media/content.aspx?id=6442452237). ■

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