

Myths About Food & Diets

Our culture is filled with mixed messages about food, weight, and dieting. From magazines to television shows to the internet, it is hard to know what or who to believe. As the diet industry makes over \$5 billion each year on people's desires to get the body they want, it is important to be an informed consumer and know the truth about how our bodies actually work with food. Below are the top 10 myths about food and diets, and the respective truths about how our bodies really respond to the foods we eat.

Myth #1: Eating a high-protein, low-carb diet will result in weight loss.

Truth: A diet that includes a significant amount of protein while severely reducing grains, fruits, and vegetables is unbalanced and will not lead to long-term, healthy weight loss. In fact, this type of diet can pose health risks, including slow metabolism, high cholesterol, heart disease, kidney stones, and gout. Additionally, eating too few carbohydrates can lead to feeling hungry more often and strong cravings, which may eventually result in overeating. Remember, the body gains weight because of extra calories consumed, not extra carbohydrates.

Myth #2: Counting calories is normal.

Truth: Viewing food in the form of numbers, rather than taste and pleasure, detaches an individual from the body's natural and innate tendency to regulate the number of calories needed in a meal or a day. When a person artificially regulates a process the body is designed to do on its own, feelings of frustration and deprivation can evolve, which often lead to overeating.

Myth #3: Skipping meals leads to weight loss.

Truth: Skipping meals actually slows metabolism, which means the body is more likely to hold onto whatever calories are consumed, rather than use them efficiently to fuel the body. It also tends to leave the body feeling extremely hungry, which is likely to result in overeating and increased caloric consumption. Side effects of a slower metabolism may include hair loss, decreased concentration, low energy, depression, and poor memory.

Myth #4: Foods are either "good" or "bad."

Truth: Actually, there is no such thing as "good" or "bad" foods; our bodies only recognize the nutritional content of a food. All foods can fit into a healthy meal plan when there is balance, variety, and moderation. Rather than focusing on eating "good" foods, try to eat a balanced diet that includes carbohydrates, protein, and fat. By following this approach, your body can benefit from both salads and cupcakes.

Myth #5: Low-fat and no-fat diets will lead to weight loss.

Truth: Just like protein and carbohydrates, fat is a necessary nutritional component. Fat actually helps the body feel satiated and remain full longer, thus minimizing the chances of overeating. Additionally, "fat free" products tend to have more sugar and calories than their full fat counterparts. Severely restricting fat from one's diet can result in constipation, gall stones, and low energy levels, and will likely affect the body's ability to absorb fat-soluble vitamins necessary for optimal health.

Myth #6: It is best to maintain as little body fat as possible.

Truth: Maintaining a low body fat percentage is actually quite dangerous. One tenth of the brain is made up of fat, and it requires additional fat to effectively transmit messages among neurons. Furthermore, fat functions as a protective mechanism to keep organs in place; without fat, organs could rub together causing internal bleeding and death. While every body's nutritional needs and physical compositions are different, the average woman should maintain a body fat percentage between 21-36%, and the average man should maintain between 10-15%.

Myth #7: The hCG diet is an effective way to lose weight.

Truth: hCG is actually the hormone produced by the human placenta during pregnancy, and in recent years has been used as a medication to increase a woman's fertility. hCG diets tend to include a severely restrictive meal plan (,500 calories per day) and regular injections of this fertility hormone. While many people on this diet may reach their desired weight loss goal, most will gain all of the weight back (and possibly an additional 10-20 pounds) within six months of resuming normal eating and stopping the injections. Common side effects of this diet may include gall stones, irregular heartbeat, and electrolyte imbalance.

Myth #8: Eating at night will lead to more body fat.

Truth: While many diets claim that eating at night will cause the body to store more fat because these calories do not get burned off with regular activity, this is simply not true. The body needs calories all throughout a 24- hour period, including during the evening. In fact, the body digests food and uses calories the same way regardless of the time of day, and whatever energy gets stored at night while sleeping will be used during the following day's activities. It is best to evenly distribute calories throughout the day, starting with breakfast and ending with a snack before bed to ensure that the metabolism remains consistently active, thus preventing overeating and subsequent weight gain.

Myth #9: Eating high-fat foods will lead to rapid weight gain.

Truth: Bodies do not naturally gain weight quickly (nor do they naturally lose weight quickly). Every pound of weight gained equals 3500 extra calories consumed above and beyond whatever the body needs calorically. Thus, if the scale is up a few pounds after enjoying nachos for dinner or popcorn at the movies, it is likely due to temporary water and/or salt retention and will resolve itself soon. While consuming these foods on a regular basis will likely result in more permanent weight gain, balancing these foods with healthier options and regular physical activity will minimize their effects on your weight.

Myth #10: All white, processed grains are bad.

Truth: While whole grains may be the healthier choice, refined grains are fine to eat so long as they're consumed in moderation (just like with any other food). In fact, the USDA recommends getting half of all grain servings from whole grains, while the other half can come from white, processed grain sources. Furthermore, both types of grains have their benefits: white, processed grains are often fortified with important nutrients, like folic acid, thiamin, riboflavin, and iron; whole grains tend to have more natural fiber, vitamin E, selenium, zinc and potassium.

How can you spot more diet myths? Follow these three simple guidelines:

- *If it sounds too good to be true, it is.* Long-term, healthy weight management does not happen with quick fixes. Instead, our bodies rely on eating a balanced diet that includes all foods and regular physical activity. Pills, food additives, hormones, or any other trick touted as the next weight-loss solution will not give you the healthy, long-term results you want.
- *If reputable health organizations do not support the trend, you shouldn't either.* Be an informed consumer and do your research. Before putting your money into the next trend, check it out and see what the experts have to say. Look for research studies to support the results touted by the diet company, and check out who's conducting and funding the research. If a pharmaceutical company pays for studies to show the effectiveness of a diet pill, question how reliable and valid the outcomes may actually be.
- *If you're not sure, ask a professional.* If ever you have doubts about whether a new diet product or program may be effective for you, consult with a Registered Dietitian who can help you understand how your body may positively or negatively respond.