



There are lots of ways to lose weight. Just ask anyone who has tried the latest popular diet. There are websites, blogs and books praising fat and bashing gluten, but does this mean that these are the best diets to follow?

And how do you measure success when dieting? Is it just about how much weight you lose? Anyone can slash their calorie intake and lose weight. But is it a plan that you can follow forever?

Most diets that promise weight loss are simply low-calorie diets. Some banish whole food

groups and others say that all foods can fit. While calorie-restriction and food-group elimination can work in the short-run, they usually lead to a whole host of problems over time. These include weight gain due to feelings of starvation and deprivation, and malnourishment from inadequate intake of certain vitamins and minerals.

If you know that you want to make changes to your diet that will help you achieve lasting weight loss and improve your overall health, check out one of the following diets and see which one sounds like it would fit best for you. Just remember: There’s no single, correct approach.

Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean diet gets high marks because it encourages you to enjoy a wide range of food, emphasizing daily intake of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, whole grains, fish, olive oil and legumes. This translates into lots of fiber, protein and omega-3 fats and modest amounts of healthy carbs, which will promote weight loss and decrease inflammation in the body, reducing risk of heart attack, stroke and type 2 diabetes. Dairy and eggs are recommended less frequently (weekly rather than daily), as are red meat and sweets, which should be eaten just once or twice a month. Refined grains, processed foods, sweetened beverages and unhealthy oils are discouraged as they promote inflammation. Coffee, tea and water are the preferred beverages, with the occasional glass of red wine. In addition to diet, this plan also focuses on getting regular exercise and sharing meals with loved ones. This plan works well for many people, as it is flexible and inexpensive, and the emphasis on physical activity and mindful eating promote important health behaviors that are usually not addressed.

Paleo Diet

By far, the Paleo diet has to be the most popular diet right now. Ask any Crossfitter you know and they’ll happily tell you all about their hunter-gatherer diet, which is typically chock-full of whole, unprocessed foods like vegetables, fruit, eggs, meat, poultry, fish, nuts and seeds. Most adherents avoid dairy, sugar, gluten, grains and anything processed, as these foods didn’t exist back in the days of early man. Nutritional anthropologists love to debate what period of time Paleo refers to, as different foods existed in various parts of the world. Thus, different versions of the paleo diet have evolved. Do beans, legumes and tubers have a place? What about added fats? Some say “yes” to grass-fed butter, but did cows really exist way back then?

The bottom line is the Paleo diet is based on eating real food, is nutrient-rich and features a good balance of protein, carbs (provided you eat enough fruit and starchy vegetables), and fat. Some will argue that the lack of calcium from dairy could contribute to osteoporosis, but others will say that many plant foods provide more bioavailable calcium in adequate amounts. As for the elimination of gluten-containing grains (wheat, rye, barley), there’s lots of good evidence to support the benefits of this approach to eating. An estimated 1 percent of all people have celiac disease (many undiagnosed), an autoimmune disease that causes damage to the small intestines when gluten is consumed. A larger group is estimated to have non-celiac gluten sensitivity (NCGS), which produces similar symptoms as celiac disease, but without the damage to the small intestines. For these people, eliminating gluten can improve health by alleviating nausea, eczema, bloating, muscle cramps and headaches, while also promoting bowel regularity.

Volumetrics Diet

Not as well-known, but scientifically sound and very effective is the Volumetrics Diet, which was created by Barbara Rolls, Ph.D., professor of nutrition and head of nutritional sciences at Pennsylvania State University. The premise of the diet is to choose foods that have a high water content, such as fruits, vegetables and dairy, which makes you feel full. Foods are categorized into low -energy-density (more volume per calorie) and high-energy-density foods (less volume per calorie). A typical day would include three meals, two snacks and a dessert of low-energy dense foods. Produce and proteins are emphasized, while sugar and processed foods are discouraged. Healthy fats such as nuts and seeds are high-energy-density foods that play an important role in encouraging satiety. The Volumetrics Diet can be effective in helping people make wiser foods choices and cut calories without feeling deprived.

Flexitarian Diet

Flexitarian is a mash-up of two words: flexible and vegetarian. This diet plan, developed by registered dietitian nutritionist Dawn Jackson Blatner, focuses on eating vegetarian most of the time and including meat only occasionally or when the craving strikes. Becoming flexitarian is about *adding* five groups of food to your diet rather than eliminating any. The five groups are: “meat” (tofu, beans, lentils, peas, nuts, seeds and eggs), fruits and vegetables, whole grains, dairy, and sugar and spice (fresh herbs and healthy sweeteners). Flexitarians have been shown to weigh 15 percent less than their carnivorous counterparts, have lower rates of heart disease, diabetes and cancer, and live 3.6 years longer. The high-fiber intake associated with a mostly plant-based diet leads to greater satiety and weight loss due to overall lower calorie intake. As a bonus, these foods are rich in antioxidants that reduce inflammation. We recommend omega-3-rich fish, such as wild Alaskan salmon, wild Pacific halibut and fresh sardines, take top billing when choosing animal protein. Poultry should be organic and red meat should be grass-fed and organic as well.

The Bottom Line

Cutting calories is a sure-fire way to help you quickly lose weight if your goal is to fit into a particular outfit for your upcoming high school reunion. But that weight loss comes from water and muscle, with very little coming from body fat. Such diets are not sustainable and are potentially dangerous. Choosing a diet that is balanced in macronutrients and built around real, whole, clean food, and that does not have you counting calories, is a more realistic way to eat for a lifestyle. But diet is not the only player when it comes to weight loss—exercise, sleep, stress reduction, socializing and mindful eating are equally important parts to long-term success. Choose one that makes sense for you and you’ll more likely win at losing.