

Dieter Beware: Weight-Loss Fads Can Be Bad for Your Health

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There's something about fall — with its back-to-school, new-start feeling — that compels many of us to revisit our plans to diet, and sometimes those plans involve fads.



Even celebrities who can afford the best personal trainers, nutritionists, doctors, therapists and private chefs are susceptible to diet gimmicks. And when "Hunger Games" star Jennifer Lawrence says that by Hollywood standards she's "obese," something's wrong.

"Women across America are weight-crazed, but women in L.A. are probably more so," says Paulette Lambert, director of nutrition at the California Health & Longevity Institute, a medical and fitness center in Westlake Village.

"My patients who fly in to New York from L.A. are so different from my usual patients," says Dr. Macrene Alexiades-Armenakas, assistant clinical professor at Yale University School of Medicine and director of the Dermatology and Laser Surgery Center in New York. "They're like 'Get me to where I need to be [weight-wise] at all costs.' "

"Diet fads seem to cycle back around about once every 10 or 12 years. Long enough for people to try a fad diet, see that it doesn't work, forget that it doesn't work, then try it all over again. Sometimes these diets are just repackages with different names," Lambert says.

Here, experts share warnings about some fads and weight-loss treatments.

The Potato Diet

If a diet sounds too wacky to make sense (here's looking at you, baby food diet, cabbage soup diet, air diet), it probably doesn't.

Dr. Adrienne Youdim, medical director of the Center for Weight Loss at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, says a diet of just potatoes (and the occasional teaspoon of fat) is missing key nutrients. "It also has a high glycemic index and raises blood sugar quickly ... problematic for diabetics. Whenever you limit intake to one food item, overall intake is reduced ... so weight loss ensues."

Besides, Lambert says, eating 1,200 calories' worth of potatoes per day or 1,200 calories in a well-rounded diet would lead to the same weight loss.

Juicing and Cleanses

"Juicing is everywhere right now, which I don't like, because juicing is high in sugar and increases insulin levels," Lambert says.

Fitness expert Harley Pasternak, who's worked with Lady Gaga, Jennifer Hudson and Natalie Portman, says, "Any cleanse where you're not getting all of your essential nutrients, including fiber, protein and the healthy fats your body needs to exist, heal and thrive, and you're consuming a sub-healthy level of calories, is just bad for you. ... Short-term starvation diets are masking themselves as detox diets."

Gluten-Free Diets

"People lose weight when they go off gluten because it cuts out a lot of junk food," Lambert says. "But there's a lot of gluten-free junk food out there too." Many gluten-free versions of foods that normally contain wheat tend to be high in sugar, low in fiber.

It's fine to cut out cookies, cakes, pasta and pizza — all of which normally contain gluten, Lambert says.

People with celiac disease cannot eat gluten without getting sick, but cutting out gluten has also become a diet trend, and Lambert says they'd do well to consider eating some whole grains.

HCG and Other Injections



"The HCG shot is back up again," says Lambert, who mainly credits the weight loss that people report on the HCG regimen to the 500-calories-a-day diet that often accompanies it.

HCG is human chorionic gonadotropin, a hormone produced during pregnancy, Alexiades-Armenakas says. The hormone is sometimes used (or is merely claimed to be used) in injections to help weight loss.

According to the Mayo Clinic, the diet is neither safe nor effective. And the Food and Drug Administration has warned against HCG injection diets since the 1970s.

"FDA-approved uses for prescription HCG products include female fertility and select hormonal treatment in males, and the FDA has not approved prescription HCG for any other uses, including weight loss," FDA spokeswoman Christopher Kelly says. "FDA has received reports of HCG injections for weight-loss associated with pulmonary embolism, depression, cerebrovascular issues, cardiac arrest and even death."

Other injections used to lose weight can be problematic too. In 2010, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued warning letters to six U.S. medical spas saying they were making false and misleading claims about injections they said eliminated fat. The overall safety of such so-called lipodissolve products is unknown, the FDA says.

Often "you don't know what they use in those injections, and you can have significant allergic reactions," Youdim says.

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