

An Introduction to Dieting

Chapter 1: What is a Diet?

“Diet” as a defined term means “the type of food an organism typically eats.” For example, a carnivore eats meat and an herbivore eats plants. Humans are omnivores, meaning we get our nutrients from a combination of both animal and plant matter.

For the purposes of this ebook, we will be focusing more on what it means “to diet,” that is to alter one's eating habits or reduce one's caloric intake for the purposes of losing weight or achieving a health goal, such as building muscle.

While dieting to achieve particular body goals is not a modern development, people in our day and age have access to a greater variety of dietary aids and information than any previous generation. Unfortunately, this is sometimes to our detriment as there is a lot of incorrect information in circulation that could actually hinder your weight loss goals more so than help.

A diet is not something anyone should embark on without proper research and guidance. After all, what we eat is a major part of our lives, both in a social sense as well as in the way it affects our bodies. Choosing a diet—or even choosing *to* diet in the first place—is not a decision that should be made lightly. As you will find out by the end of this ebook, a diet is a major lifestyle change in more ways than one, and in order to achieve success, you must demonstrate commitment.

An Introduction to Dieting

The goal of this ebook is to provide you with the knowledge you need to make proper dietary decisions to achieve the nutrition and weight goals you set for yourself. Before undertaking any diet, a good question to ask yourself is, “What results do I hope to achieve?”

Like reaching any other goal in life, selecting and following through a successful diet is much easier when you know what you want and have outlined it clearly beforehand.

Before you read any further, ask yourself the following questions. It may even be helpful to write your answers down on a piece of paper so you can compare your notes to some of the diets and eating habits we'll feature later.

- **What are the primary areas where your current diet is not meeting your health, activity, or weight loss needs?** Do you eat a lot of fast food or heavily processed ready-to-eat meals? Does your day to day diet feature too much sugar and salt? Etc.
- **What are the three things you could eliminate from your usual eating habits that you know are unhealthy?**
- **What is a healthy weight range for your gender, height, and body type?** How far away are you from this range?

Once you have answered the above questions, you will find selecting a diet much easier, because you'll already have an idea of what you want!

An Introduction to Dieting

Chapter 2: How do I Start?

Trust the Back of the Package, Not the Front

Unfortunately, going on a diet is not as simple as heading to the grocery store and loading down a cart with every food that looks healthy at first glance. Why? Because many foods marketed as being “diet” or “health food” are not actually any better for you than their normal counterparts.

During the fat-free dieting craze of the 70s and 80s, many companies released low-fat or fat-free alternatives to their popular products. These were marketed as being appropriate for low-fat dieters and helpful for weight loss. But to the detriment of consumers, what many of these companies did was simply exchange one unhealthy substance for another. Many low-fat foods were processed with extreme additions of salt and sugar so they still tasted appetizing.

A quick glance at the backside of most products will yield the item's nutritional information. Compare the nutritional content of a “diet” item to its regular counterpart and you may find yourself surprised to find it is actually *worse* for you.

In keeping with the theme, a diet is not just a change in your eating habits, but a change in your whole lifestyle. You will find your mentality changing on a number of subjects the longer you diet and the more success you find while dieting.

An Introduction to Dieting

A Successful Diet Changes More than Just Your Eating Habits

In order to eat healthier foods, you must first purchase healthier foods. And from there, you must prepare healthier meals from the ingredients you buy. Sound simple? It is, but it can be difficult to adjust to at first. If you are an adult who is overweight, chances are you have been buying the same unhealthy foods for many years and eating them even longer, since you likely buy food similar to what your parents bought for you. This means the act of going on a diet—which seems simple on the surface—actually means reversing years of unhealthy cooking and grocery shopping habits.

Many people worry dieting means restricting their caloric intake so severely they'll be constantly hungry or eating nothing but salads for lunch and dinner with maybe some oatmeal for breakfast. While this is one way to lose weight, who on earth would want to do it that way?

If your chosen diet involves continuing to eat a lot of processed foods heavy in fat and sugar, then yes, you will have to eat significantly less food in order to lose weight. However, changing the makeup of your meals so they emphasize fresh ingredients and healthy cooking methods ensures you will be able to cut calories without drastically reducing the amount of food you eat. Portion size is important, but you will be surprised at how many portions of healthy, home-cooked food you will have to eat in order to equal one or two portions of fast food when it comes to calories.

An Introduction to Dieting

Your diet begins when you outline your goals and mentally dedicate yourself to the task. The next step happens at the grocery store! Before hitting the supermarket, a little research goes a long way:

1. **What do you plan to cook?** The internet is an excellent resource for recipes, be you a cooking enthusiast or someone new to the art. Looking up a few recipes and saving them or printing them out can assist you in planning a shopping list that's as short as possible and re-uses many ingredients, which can be handy for those on a budget or those with limited storage space. Before purchasing any groceries, you should also ensure your kitchen is up to the task. Do you have the required equipment to cook what you want to eat? Do you have enough time to prepare the meals as the recipes indicate, or should you search for something a little simpler?
2. **What do you need to buy in order to cook these things?** It may sound elementary, but compiling a shopping list and sticking to it can be a fantastic dietary aid. If you already know what you're going to cook and you've got the list in your hand, you will be much less likely to give in to the temptation of ready-made packaged meals and snack foods. Plus, if you find recipes that use similar ingredients, you can cut down on the number of individual items you need to buy and keep track of.
3. **Will your recipes produce leftovers? If so, what do you plan to do with them?** Many recipes found both online and in cook books are family-sized. If you are cooking for one or two, remember you may have to scale back the proportions in your cooking or embrace

An Introduction to Dieting

leftovers! Leftovers are fantastic in the diet world. They save you time and temptation the next day. After all, you're a lot less likely to grab a burger and fries at lunch if you've already brought leftover roast chicken or stir-fry.

4. **Variety is important!** If your research leads you to five or six good recipes and you end up enjoying them, great! But don't forget to vary your meals, especially if you are cooking for more than just yourself. The last thing you want to do is form a mental association between “dieting” and “eating boring food.” This will cause your body to crave either new and exciting things—which could potentially be awful for you if purchased on impulse—or old familiar comfort food. The exact food you're trying to cut out of your diet!

Once you've got a shopping list and a good idea of your cooking skill, stick with it! Maintaining this level of mental discipline may be hard at first, but given time and persistence you will find yourself falling into the habit of only buying what you need. An impulse purchase every now and again isn't terrible, but it better be a healthy one!

Chapter 3: Carbs, Proteins, Fats, and Sugars

When you are exploring what diet suits your needs the best, and what foods to buy, you will find reference to all sorts of substances and a lot of information that probably sounds contradictory (and often is). Depending on your source material, you will be told fat, carbohydrates, sugar, red meat, trans-fats, cholesterol, sodium, and non-trans-fats are all terrible for you in equal measure. How do you separate the science from the pseudoscience? What *is* actually healthy to eat?

Unfortunately, the answer is not quite so cut and dry. While some substances are definitely bad for your body because they slow your metabolism and convert empty calories to stored fat, the truth of the matter is a successful diet achieves a *balance* of these things, not a total elimination of one or more of the major macronutrient types.

What is a Macronutrient and Why do They Matter?

Even if you haven't heard the term macronutrient before, you have definitely heard of them. A macronutrient is a substance the body requires in large amounts in order to function properly. The three main macronutrients people consume are carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. Sugar is not technically a macronutrient, but it is included in this section because monitoring sugar intake is just as important for losing weight as monitoring your macronutrient consumption.

An Introduction to Dieting

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates, commonly referred to as just “carbs” in the dieting world, are something you are often told you should stay away from. While it's true many unhealthy foods are high in simple carbohydrates, it is important to remember carbs are the body's primary source of energy and they are absolutely necessary to maintain energy levels, especially if you are coupling your diet with a workout plan.

Out of all the macronutrients, carbs are metabolized the quickest. This means your body is eager to break them down into glucose or other sugars that can be converted into glucose. Your digestive tract can absorb these sugars quickly, and after a brief visit to the liver, they enter your bloodstream where they provide necessary, readily-accessible energy.

There are two main types of carbohydrate:

1. **Simple carbohydrates** are the ones your diet books warned you about, although they are not altogether bad. Fruit and milk, for example, are full of simple carbohydrates. This means the carbs in these foods can be broken down quickly to provide the body with a speedy boost of energy. This is one of the reasons why fruit is such a great pick-me-up.
2. **Complex carbohydrates** are known as fiber and starch, and they provide the body with energy over a longer period of time.

The way they are metabolized also means when you consume them,

An Introduction to Dieting

you feel fuller for longer. The carbohydrates found in whole grains, brown rice, and vegetables are complex carbohydrates. Many low-carb diets advocate eating little to no simple carbohydrates and focusing your primary carb intake on complex carbohydrates, and even limiting those.

Unless you decide on a strict low-carb diet, the recommended amount of carbohydrates an adult human should consume is no less than 100 grams. Obviously there is a small variation dependent on the size of the individual, but overall if you eat fewer than 100 grams of carbohydrates per day, you may experience negative side effects such as mood instability and bad breath.

Paying attention to the *source* of your carbohydrates is far more important than lowering your carb intake altogether.

Protein

Protein is a vital part of your diet if you plan on including exercise in your weight-loss regime. Why? It promotes muscle growth, and while it isn't possible to “turn fat into muscle” like some diet products like to claim, you can certainly build muscle via exercise *while* dieting to lose fat.

The protein you eat is converted by your body into other proteins for all manner of important, necessary bodily functions. Proteins assist the body with tissue repair, and the communication between cells, as well as

An Introduction to Dieting

hormone regulation. While some sources of protein are definitely better than others, in the end, there are next to no diets that insist you lower your protein intake.

Like carbohydrates, protein comes in two major forms. Whether a protein is labeled “complete” or “incomplete” is based on the protein's amino acid content. Amino acids are the organic chemicals that make up the various types of proteins in the human body, and there are twenty different amino acids to which a human being must consume in order to produce all the types of protein required to sustain life.

Your body can create the necessary amount of ten out of the twenty amino acid types. In order to get enough of the other ten amino acids, you must consume them via eating protein.

The two types of dietary protein are:

1. **Complete proteins**, which come from animal products, primarily meat. These proteins contain nearly all the vital amino acids your body requires.
2. **Incomplete proteins** are found in plants, such as beans, nuts, grains, and vegetables. They provide a more limited variety of amino acids, and as such, you must eat more of them in both quantity and variety in order to obtain suitable amino acid levels. The incomplete nature of plant proteins is the primary reason why many on a vegetarian or vegan diet struggle to consume enough protein (or

An Introduction to Dieting

enough variations of protein) to obtain optimum amino acid levels and thus optimum health.

A good rule of thumb for protein consumption is you should eat at least one gram of protein per pound of your goal bodyweight.

Fats

The dreaded fat is not actually as terrible for you as many diets would make it out to be. More than half the body's energy comes from fat, and fat content is one of the determining factors behind which foods satiate us and make us feel full. Fat is a necessary part of vitamin absorption and maintaining the membranes of the very cells that make up your body!

It is true many foods high in fat are also terrible for you, but what generally makes this true is the *amount* of fat present in these foods, not the fact that fat is present at all. Look at it this way: a piece of meat has a normal fat content that isn't dangerously high. But if we roll that meat in breadcrumbs, deep-fry it in a fat-based oil, and then dip it in a fatty dipping sauce, we are adding various amounts of fat to that baseline amount *three different times*.

Cutting back on fat is also an easier way to cut back on calories by sheer numbers than cutting back on carbs and protein, which will be explained in the following chapter.

An Introduction to Dieting

Like protein and carbohydrates, fats come in different varieties as well, and each type has a different effect on the body:

1. **Unsaturated fats** are divided into two subcategories, polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats, and they are found primarily in plant-based fat sources and oils. They are the most beneficial type of dietary fat and have a number of positive effects on the body, such as regulating blood cholesterol and possibly decreasing the risk of diabetes. This group also includes the much-touted Omega 3 fatty acids which appear to benefit cardiac health and decrease the risk of heart disease.
2. **Saturated fats** come mainly from animal sources, such as meat, and the associated solid fats that come attached to it; but also butter and cream. These fats have been shown to increase your risk of heart disease and they raise your overall blood cholesterol level.
3. **Trans fats** sometimes occur naturally, but by and large most of the trans fat people consume is a by-product of food processing techniques. These trans fats are sometimes called “industrial fats” or “synthetic fats” and they also raise your overall blood cholesterol level.

Aside from reading the nutritional labels on your food's packaging, there is good rule of thumb to follow when trying to figure out if a dietary fat is primarily unsaturated or saturated/trans: unsaturated fats tend to be liquid at room temperature, such as olive oil, canola oil, peanut oil, or corn oil.

An Introduction to Dieting

Conversely, fats are primarily composed of saturated or trans fat are solid at room temperature, such as butter, shortening, and meat fat.

Sugars

Sugar is not just found in little white packets at cafes and restaurants. There are many forms of sugar, both naturally occurring and refined, and excess sugar can have extremely detrimental effects on health regardless of whether or not it's from a source that seems "healthier."

When you consume sugar, the level of sugar in your blood spikes quickly afterward, which stimulates the pancreas into producing a hormone called insulin. Insulin is the hormone that regulates our blood glucose levels, and when you eat a diet that is consistently high in sugar; your pancreas will be kicked into overdrive. The resulting sugar and insulin spikes will not only wreak havoc on your metabolism, but excess insulin has been linked to the inhibition of growth hormones as well as weakening your immune system by prohibiting the absorption of Vitamin C.

Over time, the constant strain on the pancreas from secreting excess insulin to counteract excess blood sugar can lead to the development of diabetes, which as we know is a serious and lifelong medical problem.

And I am sure you are aware of sugar's effect on tooth decay and weight gain! Since sugar has no inherent vitamin or nutritional value, the calories you are putting into your body when you eat sugar are not actually doing

An Introduction to Dieting

you any nutritional good aside from a very short-term spike in energy followed by a crash as your body tries to correct itself.

Chapter 4: Calories, Nutrients, and Why They Matter

In the end, all dieting comes down to the following rule:

If you consume fewer calories than your body burns, you will lose weight.

If you consume more calories than your body burns, you will gain weight.

But what is a calorie and how did it become the go-to method by which to judge your dietary progress? How important is calorie counting if you're eating healthier anyhow?

What is a Calorie? How Does the Body Burn Them for Energy?

Technically speaking, a calorie is the amount of energy needed to raise one gram of water by one degree Celsius. Of course, it has also become a household word that signifies something different, but the basic definition we focus on is the same: energy.

Calories are the fuel our body needs to perform every single function it needs to survive. Without adequate calories, we starve. And when we starve, our bodies shut down one organ system at a time before eventual death. This is why eating disorders are so insidious—people with eating disorders see calories as an enemy and reducing them by any means necessary as the ultimate goal.

An Introduction to Dieting

While calorie reduction does lead to weight loss, you absolutely cannot go below the threshold of calories your body needs or you will not survive.

The different macronutrients mentioned in the previous chapter are all broken down into different amounts of calories:

- Each gram of **sugar** contains **4 calories**.
- Each gram of **fat** contains **9 calories**.
- Each gram of **protein** contains **4 calories**.
- Each gram of **carbohydrate** contains **4 calories**.

The higher caloric content of fat is the primary reason why higher-fat foods tend to be a poor solution for weight loss. While some fat is absolutely necessary for survival and energy, you would have to eat twice the protein or carbohydrates in order to achieve the same caloric quantities as any given amount of fat.

Dependent on a number of factors such as age, size, gender, and activity level, the average adult needs at least 1200 calories' worth of energy to perform the basic necessary functions of life and to remain sedentary. Any activity we engage in on top of that from work to play to sex requires we consume more calories in order to fuel it. This extra consumption is typically an additional 400 to 600 calories a day, though obviously the numbers will vary based on activity level.

An Introduction to Dieting

There are a number of different online calculators you can use to determine your ideal caloric consumption and a consultation with a dietitian is always a good idea before radically changing your calorie habits.

To think of calories in terms of weight gain, you must consume an *excess* of 3500 calories in order to gain one pound of fat. This is not calories consumed total, but rather calories consumed above and beyond your daily activity needs.

In terms of weight loss, of course, the same rule applies. However when taking weight loss into account, you can achieve your caloric deficit by means of both dieting *and* exercise. If you wanted to cut 500 calories per day from your diet, you could either diet the whole 500 off or diet 250 and exercise for 250, or some other variation.

Crash Diets Don't Work and are Terrible for You

When you drastically reduce your caloric intake over a short period of time, the results can be encouraging and very immediate. It's like the weight just melts off! But this is a short-term effect that has lasting, long-term health consequences.

The body cannot continue down this path for long, and you will find yourself tired. It is also a natural response to starvation—which is what a crash diet is—to eat back those calories as soon as possible, and with extra.

An Introduction to Dieting

This means while you may lose a few pounds in the short term, overall you are quite likely to end up heavier.

The longer you starve yourself, the more desperate your body becomes to conserve energy. As such, it begins to shut down non vital functions as well as slow the metabolism. This means after a certain point, you will simply stop losing weight.

We cannot live without calories, and while dieting has the ultimate goal of reducing calories, eating healthy is more about making the most of the calories you consume and ensuring they come from sources that will encourage your body by means of providing beneficial nutrients.

Micronutrients

Micronutrients are the necessary vitamins and minerals required for healthy growth and life, referred to as “micro” because compared to the macronutrients, your body only needs them in small amounts. But that doesn't make them any less vital! Deficiencies of even one or two micronutrients can cause serious health problems.

There are far too many micronutrients to list here in any great detail, but a few of the most important are already well-publicized due to their proven ability to ward off dire health problems.

An Introduction to Dieting

Essential Minerals

The minerals your body needs to function include but are not limited to:

- **Chloride**, which regulates your body's electrolytes and assists with distributing water.
- **Copper** is required by your body's connective tissues and helps with the absorption of iron. Copper deficiency can increase the likelihood of health problems in developing fetuses.
- **Iodine** is essential to the function of the thyroid gland, which helps your body to metabolize fats into energy and promotes growth. Iodine deficiency is the leading cause of fetal brain damage and used to be one of the leading causes of miscarriage until iodized salt was introduced.
- **Iron** is necessary for the body's production of red blood cells and is one of the most common mineral deficiencies. A deficiency of iron is known as anemia, and anemia can lead to fatigue as well as multiple system organ difficulties, hair loss, and many other symptoms.
- **Magnesium** is important for cardiac function and without it, your body cannot properly absorb calcium or Vitamin C. Magnesium also assists your body with converting blood sugar into energy.
- **Manganese** promotes bone growth and helps your body properly metabolise all the necessary dietary macronutrients.
- **Sodium** is responsible for regulating your body's fluid levels and maintaining a proper hydration balance. Sodium deficiency can lead to vomiting, fatigue, and neurological symptoms.

An Introduction to Dieting

Essential Vitamins

Those dieting to lose weight are often encouraged to take a multivitamin pill to cover any vitamin deficiencies that may arise from their dietary changes. Many people on high-fat, high-sugar diets that include a lot of fast food are often suffering from vitamin deficiencies to begin with. It is possible to overdose on some vitamins and speaking to a dietitian prior to beginning any multivitamin use is recommended, although overdoses are rare.

- **Vitamin A** promotes good eyesight and poor night vision is often a sign of Vitamin A deficiency. This vitamin also improves growth and regulates a healthy appetite.
- **B Vitamins** have varied and many benefits, such as Vitamin B1 promoting a healthy nervous system and Vitamin B2 assisting the breakdown of macronutrients as well as encouraging healthy skin and hair growth.
- **Vitamin C** is an important part of the immune system and improves the lifespan of the very cells that make up your body. Scurvy, a horrible historical illness, was caused solely by Vitamin C deficiency and is now almost eradicated in the modern day.
- **Vitamin D**, like Calcium, promotes strong, healthy bones and teeth.
- **Vitamin E** is a powerful antioxidant and a deficiency of it can lead to fertility problems.
- **Folic Acid** is absolutely essential to prevent birth defects during pregnancy and assists in the production of red blood cells.