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Crash and burn

WOMEN'S WORLD

By DR NOR ASHIKIN MOKHTAR

Fad diets are exactly just that – a fad. Stick to scientifically proven methods of weight loss, which means a healthy diet and plenty of exercise.

READING about celebrities' diet practices can give you quite a headache. What is the macrobiotic diet that Gwyneth Paltrow follows, or the Zone diet that Jennifer Aniston is on?

Do magazines and tabloid newspapers really have all the secrets to the stars' diets and weight loss methods?



The weight equation is simple – burn more calories than you take in, and voila, you lose weight.

Are those contestants on *The Biggest Loser* for real?

These are some of the common questions I get from women who confide in me about their dieting problems. And, of course, the most frequently asked question of all is: How can I lose weight quickly?

Do crash diets work?

We all want to lose weight fast. It might be because there's a party around the corner and you want to squeeze into that great dress you bought. Or maybe you're getting married soon and you want to look fantastic in your wedding photos.

Most likely though, it's because you find it hard to maintain a long-term diet and exercise plan, so it seems easier to go on a crash diet whenever you find your clothes getting too tight.

I don't blame you, as we've all been guilty of this at some point in our lives.

But the bad news is, crash diets do not work. Doctors and scientists have been saying this all along, and things have not changed.

If a diet method sounds too good to be true – using words like “guaranteed” and “secret” – and promises fantastic results, it's probably just hot air.

Some of these fad diets involve eating only cabbage soup or grapefruit, taking diet pills and laxatives, replacing meals with supplements and potions, or fasting.

You may wonder why they don't work. After all, they all result in reduction of calories, which is what causes weight loss.

Slashing your daily calories to below 1,000 can make the scales drop, but it will also backfire on you later.

When you don't have enough calories, you are not able to exercise effectively because you are burning your muscles, which weaken you.

As you burn muscles, you are also slowing your metabolism. Once you stop dieting, you will find that your metabolism remains at that pace and you burn calories slower than ever before. This is why you gain your weight back even faster when you come off a crash diet.

Diet pills are also not recommended because they are not proven to work and can be extremely dangerous, as we have seen from some reports of people suffering serious conditions after taking pills and supplements.

You can't escape exercise

The good news is, you can lose weight rapidly, but you have to do it safely and be absolutely committed to sticking to it in the long term.

It's very simple: simply burn more calories than you eat. You cannot achieve this just by dieting alone, but with a combination of increasing physical activity and eating fewer calories.

You will need almost an hour a day of moderate exercise in order to lose weight. The most effective calorie-burning exercise is cardio-exercise, such as running, cycling, swimming, aerobics, brisk walking, and anything that gets your heart rate up.

Doing an hour may be easy, but it's more important to increase the intensity of your exercise so that you sweat for the entire hour. If you find that you can't spend one straight hour on exercise, then break it up into a morning and evening workout.

Interval training is also a great way to burn more calories in less time. This is where you spend a short period doing the activity at high intensity (such as sprinting or cycling uphill) and then drop to a low intensity to allow the body to recover, before repeating the cycle again.

You also need to include a few hours a week of strength training, which strengthens your muscles and increases your metabolism. At least twice a week, use weights to work all your major muscle groups. Be sure to get advice on doing strength-training the right way, so that you don't hurt yourself.

Smart dieting

When it comes to your diet, what you eat is as important as how much you eat. Don't just blindly reduce your total food intake – it's smarter to cut down on certain types of food that contribute the most calories to your daily diet.

Reduce carbohydrates like rice, noodles, breads, potatoes, and cereals. However, I do not encourage cutting them out altogether, as they provide you with daily energy. Try to choose the wholegrain versions.

Cut down on high-sugar stuff and avoid adding sugar into your meals or drinks. As much as possible, trim the fat from meats and dairy foods.

Foods that you can eat include fruits, vegetables, egg whites, soy products, fish, shellfish, low-fat dairy products and lean meat (without the skin, or the breast portion). Protein will give you energy with fewer fat calories, minimise muscle loss and maximise fat loss.

Drink plenty of water, which keeps you hydrated, particularly since you are doing more exercise, and it also helps simulate a feeling of fullness.

You should be able to comfortably achieve cutting back on 500 calories a day, with a moderate exercise regime and healthier eating habits. The minimum level of calories you need a day is 1,200kcal, but do not go down to less than 1,050 calories a day.

By being disciplined and sticking to a moderately intense – but safe – plan, you can lose at least one-and-a-half kgs a week.

Lastly, don't be ashamed of wanting to lose weight because of a wedding or a beautiful dress. A reason like that can be a great motivator to help you stick to the plan.

In my next article, I will share some of the most common mistakes that people make when trying to lose a few kilos quickly. These mistakes can sabotage the most disciplined weight-loss plans, so it is best to be mindful of them!

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