Separate fact, fat and fad

Gimmicky diets often result in weight loss at first, before leaving a person less healthy — and heavier — down the road; learn how to spot shonky programs.

By Karissa Woolfe

If the magazine covers in your waiting room are anything to go by, Australians are obsessed with dieting. Paleo, low-carb, detox, raw, clean eating, etc. Every week there seems to be a new ‘diet’ craze claiming to revolutionise the way we eat and offering the promise of rapid weight loss.

Statistics show that during 2011–12, more than 2.3 million Australians reported dieting to lose weight or for health reasons, the majority of whom were aged 51–70.

Judging by the wave of ongoing trends, it’s unlikely fad diets will disappear any time soon.

Nurses in many settings are well positioned to be asked about such diets, so it is helpful to know if there’s any substance to their claims.

HOW TO SPOT A FAD DIET

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs)

define fad diets as any eating plan that promotes results, such as fast weight loss, without the scientific evidence to support its claims.

Common features of fad diets include:

• celebrity endorsements
• strict food rules
• exclusion of an entire food group
• an unrestricted amount of a certain food
• a ‘magical’ newly discovered food or food combination
• a commercial product with enthusiastic testimonials and scientific jargon making it sound almost too good to be true (and where the small print says ‘in conjunction with a healthy eating plan and exercise’).

DO THEY WORK FOR WEIGHT LOSS?
The science of weight loss is simple: consume fewer kilojoules than your body expends.

Fad diets may appear to work initially; however, this is usually due to a decrease in kilojoule intake upon commencing a new eating plan. Many fad diets become difficult to continue and are unsustainable in the long term.

A recent meta-analysis comparing numerous ‘diets’, concluded that regardless of the dietary approach, they were all equally effective in achieving significant weight loss (an average of 8kg) over the first six months. They were also equally ineffective in the long term, with study participants ultimately regaining weight.

Successful weight loss and eating for good health comes down to modifying eating behaviour. It is essential that any eating pattern meets nutritional needs, is practical and is suitable for individual lifestyles. The ultimate goal is to achieve and maintain a nutritionally balanced healthful eating pattern that can be sustained in the long term. Regular physical activity is also important, especially for those wanting to lose weight.

DANGERS OF FAD DIETING

Not only are fad diets ineffective, they can also be dangerous.

• Muscle loss Whilst fad diets successfully achieve weight loss results in the short-term, evidence suggests that the weight lost is mostly lean muscle and water, with little effect on body fat.

Breaking down muscle leads to a loss of water, creating the illusion of rapid weight loss, and a reduced metabolic rate. As a result, when the diet is stopped, it is easier for the body to regain fat mass than it was prior to going on the diet. Older adults are particularly susceptible, as it is more difficult for them to regain lost muscle mass and thus strength.

• Nutritional imbalance Rarely are fad diets nutritionally balanced, putting participants at risk of not getting certain nutrients. For example, the paleo diet (also known as the caveman diet, or Paleolithic diet) recommends avoiding calcium-rich dairy, and fibre-rich grains and legumes. A recent review of the paleo diet advocated for GPs to counsel patients following the Palaeolithic diet about adequate calcium intake, especially those at higher risk of osteoporosis.

• Hypoglycemia People living with diabetes managed with insulin or a sulphonylurea medication also need to be wary of fad diets. Fad diets that leave out foods containing carbohydrates may place them at higher risk of hypoglycaemia, particularly if medication is not adjusted.
PEPA offers all health professionals the opportunity to participate in Australia’s only placements (up to five days) in palliative care services. Also offered are a range of palliative approach workshops including tailored Australian Indigenous, aged care and multicultural workshops. PEPA participants have developed stronger networks and improved links to specialist palliative care services.

Funding support
PEPA is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health. There is no fee for placement or workshop attendance. Financial assistance for travel and accommodation may be provided. Reimbursement towards backfill is available to facilitate placement attendance.

Apply for PEPA
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Do you or your staff care for people who are at end-of-life?

“I have become a lot more confident, my communication skills are better when talking about death and dying. I learned a lot about symptom management.”
– Nurse

“I feel more comfortable talking and working with patients that are terminal” – AIN

KEY PRACTICE POINTS

• An easy way to sort fact from fad is to look beyond the smoke and mirrors of celebrity endorsements and clever marketing.
• Swap paleo for Plato! Change your definition of ‘diet’ from ‘restrictive eating to lose weight’ to ‘the kinds of food that a person habitually eats’.
• There is no one-size-fits-all approach with diet. A diet needs to be individualised to help the patient stick to it and maximise chances of success, especially with weight loss and diabetes management in the long term.
• An Accredited Practising Dietitian can provide practical, expert, individual dietary advice on how to lose weight and stay healthy.

Karissa Woolfe is an accredited practicing dietitian (APD). To locate an accredited practicing dietician in your area, go to the ‘Find an APD’ section of the DAA website at daa.asn.au or call 1800 812 942.