WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN’T.

It’s time to ask some serious questions about why America is a fat nation. We live in a country where 70 percent of Americans and 40 percent of children are overweight, where one in two Americans has either pre-diabetes or type 2 diabetes. But what exactly is causing this health crisis?

Clearly, it has something to do with what we’re eating. Most of us agree that the way we’re eating makes us fat and that eating differently would fix it.

But that’s where the agreement ends and the confusion begins. Which is why we need better answers to our questions. Scientific research is uncovering some very interesting facts about diet, and what works and what doesn’t. The biggest discovery is this: Weight loss is NOT simply a matter of energy balance or calories in/calories out. It’s not all about just eating less and exercising more. If that were working, we would all be thin. Our biology is much more complex than that.

Here’s a shocking fact science is revealing: OVEREATING DOESN’T MAKE YOU FAT.

If you eat the wrong foods—foods high in sugar and refined carbs—you will gain weight. And if you eat a higher-protein, higher-fat diet, you will lose weight. Why? Because of changes in hormones that drive hunger and fat storage.

The cause of obesity is eating the wrong foods, not eating too many calories.

Those extra pounds you may have on your stomach, hips, or thighs are almost certainly a symptom of a deep imbalance in your body that’s triggered by eating the wrong foods and not eating enough of the right foods. Dieting just doesn’t work because it doesn’t address the cause of weight gain and the reasons we can’t lose weight.

Weight loss is a $600 billion industry built on the promise of quick-fix ways to battle the bulge, typically without much thought about why the extra weight is there in the first place. As a doctor, I’ve learned that when patients understand the reasons for their symptoms, they feel more empowered to participate actively in their own healing journey.

The same is true when it comes to weight loss. The more you understand the reasons why you’re gaining weight or are unable to lose it, the easier it is to correct the problem. If we look at excess weight as an imbalance deep within the body, it becomes clear that shedding the pounds is a matter of restoring proper function to our system.

There are thousands of diet books and weight loss gurus out there, all claiming to have the answer. My belief is that there really isn’t one diet plan that works for everybody. Because we are each built differently and exposed to different environmental inputs, every single person will need a program tailored to his or her unique needs.

All that said, each of the diet plans on the market today do offer some nuggets of wisdom, as well as some empty promises based on wishful thinking. I’ve familiarized myself with many of these diets, and am sharing what I’ve learned to help you understand which approaches may work best for you and which ones to avoid.
1. Atkins Diet

Developed by Dr. Robert Atkins, a specialist in cardiology and complementary medicine, the Atkins Diet uses low carbohydrate intake to induce ketosis. Ketosis is the metabolic state during which fat—rather than carbohydrate—is used for energy. It’s based on the premise that as the body fuels itself using stored fat, your fat cells shrink, your blood sugar goes down, insulin decreases, and you lose weight.

**Nugget of Wisdom:** Cut back on sweets and refined carbohydrates, and include more low-glycemic carbohydrates, such as non-starchy vegetables, in your diet.

**Wishful Thinking:** If you don’t consider the quality of your food, you won’t truly heal your body. You’ll only put a Band-Aid over your weight problem. It’s good that this diet plan encourages you to avoid refined carbohydrates like bread, pasta, sugar, cookies, crackers, and juice, but it doesn’t teach you that eating high-quality food is just as important. In fact, Atkins’ own brand of food includes inflammatory foods like sucralose and artificial sweeteners like sugar alcohols, as well as “natural” and artificial flavors. It’s best to eat a whole-foods diet with real ingredients!

2. Weight Watchers

Started almost 50 years ago by homemaker Jean Nidetch, Weight Watchers coaches its members to lose weight using community support, as well as by controlling overall calorie intake with a simple points system.

**Nugget of Wisdom:** Moderation, variety, and balance are all key to sustaining long-term weight management. Community is essential to changing behavior. Sharing your story or hearing someone else’s can be as therapeutic as your daily dose of broccoli.

**Wishful Thinking:** Weight Watchers is a perfect example of the misguided “calories in, calories out” approach to weight loss. Successful weight management isn’t about quantity, it’s about quality. Sure, you might lose some weight by controlling your points and measuring your food intake, but that approach won’t give you long-term overall good health. Even more important, if you look at the ingredients in some of Weight Watchers’ prepackaged food, you’ll find what we saw in Atkins’ foods: toxic ingredients like artificial flavors and sweeteners, sugar, preservatives, synthetic chemicals, and other unnatural Frankenfoods you really don’t want to eat.

3. Paleo Diet

The idea with the Paleolithic Diet is to eat like our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Essentially, this means eat a plant-based, whole-foods diet that’s low in carbohydrates and high in healthy fats and good-quality protein. For carbohydrates, the Paleo Diet relies on vegetables, nuts and seeds, and low-glycemic fruits like berries, while avoiding grains and all legumes including peanuts.

**Nugget of Wisdom:** The Paleo Diet may be appropriate for people who are interested in learning how to restore health and reduce weight by getting back to basics. This plan encourages you to eat more whole, seasonal, local, organic, pasture-fed, unprocessed foods and focus on the quality of your ingredients more than on the quantity. It advises you to pay attention to where your food comes from, the degree to which it has been altered, and how healthy it was prior to harvesting. Following this diet, you may increase your micronutrient density, improve your fatty acid blood counts, boast a healthier glycemic load, and increase fiber intake.
Wishful Thinking: This diet can be problematic if you aren’t comfortable eating animal sources of protein such as fish, poultry, wild meat, and eggs. You’ll also need to educate yourself about alternative sources of many common micronutrients. For example, many people think that if they give up milk they won’t get enough calcium. However, many other foods are higher-quality sources of even more calcium. Sardine bones, for example, boast more calcium than dairy in a form that’s better absorbed by your body. Also, we may be making assumptions about what our ancestors ate that might not be true. That said, this diet is essentially a low-glycemic, high nutrient-density, mostly plant-based diet. And it works for many.

4. LOW-FAT DIET
This diet was all the rage in the 1990s. It mimicked the USDA’s Food Guide Pyramid, which touted carbohydrates as the foundation of the diet, with a little protein and an even smaller amount of fat. Fat was considered the villain, responsible for elevated cholesterol (especially LDL, or “bad” cholesterol), weight gain, food addiction, and even high blood pressure. The goal of this diet is to limit calories from fat and cholesterol.

Nugget of Wisdom: This diet helps you become knowledgeable about good fats and bad fats. Good fats heal; bad fats harm. It encourages you to eat healthy sources of fat, such as wild fish, nuts, seeds, unrefined oils, avocado, and olives. It urges you to ban bad fats, such as hydrogenated trans fats, and to limit saturated fats without eliminating them entirely. They are healthier than you think, as long as you eat the right amount of the right kind (coconut, anyone?).

Wishful Thinking: This is the trend that set America on its path to obesity by telling us to eat eight to 11 servings of rice, bread, cereal and pasta a day. Results from several significant long-term studies of people who follow this diet show no improvement related to cancer or heart disease and no significant weight loss or disease prevention. Also, food manufacturers—in a misguided attempt to present their products as healthy, low-fat or sugar-free choices—use junky Frankenfoods to replace fat and sugar. But it’s always better to eat real, whole, fresh foods rather than these artificial substitutes. Why? Not only does healthy fat satiate our bellies, provide fuel for our organs and muscles, and build important hormones, it also happens to taste great! When your brain registers good flavor, hormones that communicate messages from your belly to your brain are released, and this helps you put your fork down and step away from the table before you overeat. Without fat, the body craves more and more food, because it never receives the signal that it has been fed. Another problem with this diet is that food makers often use sugar in place of fat to follow the low-fat guidelines. But it’s not fat that makes you fat. It’s sugar!

5. GLUTEN-FREE DIET
This diet advises eliminating all sources of gluten, which is a protein found in wheat, barley, rye, spelt, kamut, and triticale, as well as many products like lipstick. Those who are sensitive to gluten may experience an overall improvement in health, along with weight loss, if they cut it from their diet. The theory is that because we’ve drastically altered the genetic composition of gluten in recent years, a huge amount of the population—more than 100 million people—may be sensitive to strains of this modified gluten. And almost three million people are allergic to gluten, a condition known as celiac disease (or celiac sprue).

The difference between the allergy and the sensitivity is that the people with the allergy have an autoimmune reaction. The protein triggers the body to attack its own tissue, especially in the gut, causing malnourishment and inflammation. The sensitivity may not ignite a full-blown autoimmune response (although it can be part of an autoimmune condition), but it causes system-wide inflammation and disruption of normal bodily function. Complaints range from extreme food cravings and digestive dysfunction to psychiatric disorders, heart disease, and blood sugar abnormalities. The thought is that when you remove the gluten, you remove the trigger responsible for causing the symptoms or disease.
This diet is meant for people who have determined that they have a sensitivity or allergy to gluten-containing grains, as well as products contaminated with gluten. And research shows that’s a lot of people. It makes you aware of potential food allergies or sensitivities masquerading as other kinds of symptoms, such as headaches, sore joints, fatigue, abnormal hormones, indigestion, and unintentional weight gain or weight loss. Also, it increases your awareness of the industrial modification of our food supply and the ill effects that poses on our health.

**Wishful Thinking:** Going gluten-free does not automatically mean you are going to lose weight. A gluten-free cookie, for example, can have the same amount of sugar as a cookie made from refined wheat flour—possibly even more! The ingredients in most commercial gluten-free products (tapioca, potato starch, rice flour, etc.) are quite high on the glycemic index. Eating foods that spike blood sugar forces your body to use more insulin. The more insulin circulating in your bloodstream, the more likely your body will store calories as fat instead of burning them. Even more important, insulin can be inflammatory, leading to many of the chronic diseases we see today: heart disease, cancer, diabetes, dementia, autoimmune disease, stroke, arthritis, asthma, and many others.

**6. VEGAN/VEGETARIAN DIET**

Vegetarianism was first documented around 1850, and the term “vegan” came on the scene roughly 100 years later. Both of these dietary lifestyles are inspired by spiritual beliefs, although recently there’s been more of an emphasis on health-based vegetarianism due to the high number of people suffering from chronic disease, or what I like to call faulty-diet disease.

There are many different types of vegetarianism. Most vegetarians are lacto-ovo vegetarians, which means they do not eat meat, poultry, or seafood but will eat eggs and dairy. Others who eat fish but avoid poultry, eggs, dairy, or meat call themselves pescatarians. Those who alternate between eating animal products and avoiding them are called flexitarians. And those who do not eat, wear, or use anything that is derived from an animal are called vegans. For many, this dietary choice is based on a spiritual belief that enlightenment or clarity can better be achieved when animal flesh is not consumed. But there are those who choose this lifestyle in order to get a health boost or because they are concerned about industrial animal husbandry.

**Wisdom:** It’s a good idea to eat less animal flesh and to consume more plant-based foods. It’s wise to respect your food, to know where it comes from, and to consider the conditions under which it was raised. Understanding the impact that food production has on the planet makes you a conscientious food consumer and a better steward of the environment.

**Wishful Thinking:** No one will dispute the health benefits of a diet heavy in vegetables and plant foods. In fact, we should all eat more of these power foods. However, just because you eliminate all or most meat, seafood, poultry, and eggs from your diet doesn’t necessarily mean you are eating more vegetables and healthy fruits. Many of my vegetarian and vegan patients have asked me why they have elevated blood sugar or nutrient deficiency-related conditions when they don’t eat meat. It turns out that when you eat more pasta, grains, starches, and genetically modified soy protein, along with rancid, oxidized nuts, seeds and oils or butters, the level of inflammation in the body rises. Between elevated blood sugars and deficiencies in vital nutrients such as protein, zinc, vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D and many important microminerals—as well as the negative impact GMO soy has on the body—it’s clear that being vegetarian or vegan is only healthy if you eat a balanced, intentionally planned diet. If done correctly, this can be a very healthy lifestyle. If not done correctly, this diet can do more harm than good for its well-intentioned subscribers.

Nugget of Wisdom:

- **Visiting 10DayDetox.com** and get started today!
7. BLOOD-TYPE DIET

Dr. Peter D'Adamo launched the Blood Type Diet in his 1996 bestselling book, Eat Right 4 Your Type. The premise of this diet is that different blood types do better on certain diets tailored to their unique biochemical make-up, as determined by genetics. While the field of epigenetics is complex, the idea is simple: no two people are genetically the same, so we can’t have a “one size fits all” approach to medicine. By personalizing a diet specific to your blood type, Dr. D'Adamo purports to diminish the prevalence of modern chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes by drawing the connection between what we eat and how it affects our health.

Nugget of Wisdom: By respecting our biochemical individuality, we can wash our genes in healthy nutrients that heal rather than harm.

Wishful Thinking: Compliance with such a restricted and compartmentalized dietary lifestyle may be difficult for many people, as well as daunting and confusing. Some people with religious or lifestyle conflicts may not be able to adhere to the diet prescribed for their blood type. I'd be concerned about possible nutrient deficiencies that may develop after entire food groups are permanently eliminated. People need to have enough food literacy to know how to make personalized modifications that optimize their nutrition. There is also a lack of conclusive, scientific, evidence-based research around the topic of lectins (the compounds found in foods, especially plant foods like grains and beans) that Dr. D'Adamo claims are the main disease-forming culprits. While we know that lectins can cause digestive issues and inflammation in some people, we are not yet comfortable proclaiming that everybody needs to eliminate foods that are high in lectins. Better to eat a diet with all the basics of good health than attempt to restrict too much and lose focus and motivation, or even compromise health.

8. DUKAN DIET

This diet was created by a French physician named Pierre Dukan more than 10 years ago to help patients lose weight and treat their type 2 diabetes. The diet is divided into four phases: attack, cruise, consolidation, and stabilization. Essentially, dieters begin by restricting their caloric intake to an extreme, only eating a mere serving of protein and some oat bran for meals. During each subsequent phase, they slowly add in more food. If you repeat phase one during the stabilization phase, Dukan claims, you can maintain your weight loss, reverse diabetes, and prevent disease.

Nugget of Wisdom: If you are eating too much food in general, especially higher-glycemic carbohydrates, cutting back will improve your health.

Wishful Thinking: At best, this diet is just a fad diet. At worst, it can send your body into a metabolic tailspin and get you hooked on sugar-free foods and other poor-quality artificial ingredients. Such severe caloric restriction is not about planting seeds of health or learning how to work with your body to create wellness. It’s self-torture! Fad diets like this are about imposing unrealistic rules of deprivation to force your body to achieve extreme weight loss-results without regard for long-term health.

9. THE JUICE DIET (SUCH AS “MASTER CLEANSE” OR “BLUEPRINT”)

There is a wide variety of diets like this out there but, in general, juice “cleanses” instruct people to drink their calories instead of eating them. You can be on a juice cleanse for a single meal, a day, a week, or even a month. Classic juice cleanses are made from vegetables and fruits. The premise behind the juice cleanse is two-fold: dramatic caloric restriction leads to rapid weight loss, and the “cleansing” aspect promotes the release of toxins from the body, thus clearing the way for weight loss.

Nugget of Wisdom: The custom of cleansing is a normal, age-old ritual. If you are feeling heavy with extra weight and environmental toxins, you might be craving more fresh fruit and vegetables, and this is a great way to get them.
Wishful Thinking: Severe caloric restriction from many of these cleanses leads to nutrient deficiencies, which pose a major health risk and do not help your body lose weight. Why? The yo-yo effect from transitioning back and forth between liquids and solids wreaks havoc on your metabolism, essentially stressing it out and, eventually, if repeated enough, causing it to fall into a slow metabolic slump. This slump encourages weight gain and inhibits weight loss. Nutrition is a key player in any healthy, sustainable weight loss program. Take protein and fiber, for example. The amino acids in protein sources are a vital component of a healthy functioning liver. Amino acids help support your innate detox system, and when you “cleanse” you don’t eat solid foods, which means you most likely aren’t getting your daily protein requirements. Juicing strips fresh fruits and vegetables of their fiber, just leaving you with a lot of sugar and maybe some minerals and vitamins. All this sugar without fiber sends your blood sugar soaring. Without the buffer of healthy fiber, increased blood sugar elevates insulin, which actually tells your body to store fat instead of burning it. A green juice once in a while as part of a healthy diet is fine, but using this as a weight loss method is not sound or safe.

10. WESTERN “SAD” DIET

The Western Diet, or the Standard American Diet (SAD), involves the sorry, processed junk many Americans have come to know as “food,” though it is completely unworthy of that title. The government, Big Food corporations, mass marketing efforts, and major advances in food science have all conspired to create the synthesized “Frankenfoods” that monopolize your grocery store shelves. Unfortunately this diet does nothing for your waistline or your health. In fact, diets high in sugar, artificial sweeteners, synthetic chemicals, food dyes, preservatives, genetically modified organisms, hormones, antibiotics, toxic environmental and agricultural chemical inputs, isolated proteins, refined flours, high fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated fats, and oxidized fats from fried food actually cause disease by igniting inflammation in every system of your body. This same inflammatory process is exactly the reason our country is facing epidemic obesity rates. What makes us sick makes us fat and what makes us fat makes us sick!

Nugget of Wisdom: In the land of plenty, with unlimited options and advanced discoveries in nutritional and food science, there comes the responsibility to choose wisely.

Wishful Thinking: The “SAD” diet is in a pitiful state based on the government’s advice to eat mainly carbohydrates, most of which have been refined and stripped of vital life-giving nutrients. The American people have been put in a precarious position. We are told we need to watch our weight, blood sugar, blood pressure, and blood lipids, yet the same entity that doles out this advice is also behind some of the biggest food crimes known to man—our very own government! The current Western diet is laden with toxic foodstuffs that would most definitely be unrecognizable to past generations.

With so many new diet trends appearing every day promising renewed health and quick weight loss, it’s no wonder many of us are confused about what to eat.

I have thought a lot about the current state of our food system and the role it plays in the obesity and diabetes crisis. I hear about my patients’ struggles with food addiction and the food cravings that dominate their thoughts day after day. I see how long they have suffered with diabesity, the continuum of blood sugar imbalance that runs from pre-diabetes and overweight to full-blown diabetes.

And I’m tired of it.
I don’t want to hear yet another story of people feeling worthless, confused, guilty, or ashamed about their weight or body size. The truth? It’s not your fault. And there is a way out of the vicious dieting cycle.

In my new book, The Blood Sugar Solution 10-Day Detox Diet, I provide the science-based blueprint for living your life without counting, measuring, depriving, restricting, suffering, over-thinking, punishing, or feeling guilty about loving food. The foods you will eat while on this program are what your body craves and biochemically understands, because it is the diet that nature intended for us to thrive.

I use the word “diet” in the same sense as the Greek word diata: a way of life. Give me 10 days, and I will show you how to take back your health and find a new way of life!

Wishing you health and happiness,

Mark Hyman, MD