



## **Why Diets Don't Work for Most People**

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If you are like most people, losing weight is at the top of your New Year's resolutions. But if you are like most people, you have a hard time sticking to a diet. We have all been bombarded with information about eating right and exercising so you probably know the fundamental principle of weight loss: the number of calories you eat must be less than the number of calories you burn. Yet, despite all of the information available on the countless ways to accomplish this, you and millions of others still battle your weight.

The diet "experts" may recommend counting calories, exchanges, points, grams, or ounces. The diet may require you to eat pre-packaged food or meal replacements. There may be strict meal plans or complicated food regimens to follow. Some methods even eliminate entire food groups – or solid food all together. Diets often tell you that there are forbidden foods or magical food combinations, and they often impose food rules that most people do not, cannot, or should not follow for very long. And of course, the rules are always changing! When the diet doesn't work, many dieters resort to appetite suppressants to help "control" hunger or dangerous "thermogenics" to boost metabolism.

Accurate statistics are very hard to come by but it is widely quoted that 90-95% of dieters regain their lost weight. Whatever the true numbers, if dieting was truly effective, your problem would have been solved with the first one! Lets look at why diets aren't the answer for most people.

### **Your Body is Programmed to Survive**

While it seems that diets often backfire, this is simply the result of your body adapting to being under-fueled. Your body has primitive, complex survival mechanisms that help keep you alive during limited periods of starvation. However, now that food is abundant and readily available, most modern "famines" are the result of self-imposed diets. Initially, you lose water and fat, but eventually your survival mechanisms kick in to conserve energy. Your body just doesn't realize that you are doing this on purpose! Since muscle burns calories, some of your muscle mass may be given up to lower your metabolism and "save you" from starvation. And though it seems unfair, as you lose weight, your lighter body may not need as many calories. As a result, you burn fewer calories each day and your weight loss slows down. This is the frustrating "plateau" that dieters so often experience.

When the diet is over (and it always is, eventually) and you return to your previous eating habits, your body quickly replaces its fat stores. However, unless you are actively exercising, the majority of the muscle tissue you lost during the diet will not be regained. Ultimately, this causes you to have a lower metabolic rate and a higher body fat percentage than before the diet. This explains the irony that most people are less healthy than before they tried to lose weight by going on a diet!

### **Deprivation Can Lead to Cravings**

But it is not just your body that rebels when you diet. Your mind rebels against strict dieting too. This happens because most diets are based on limiting various foods in one way or another. When certain foods are forbidden, you begin to place special value on them. Remember how you craved rich, creamy peanut butter when you weren't supposed to eat fat, or piping hot bread when you were on a low carbohydrate diet? When food is restricted, you begin to feel deprived. These feelings of deprivation can cause powerful cravings. When you finally give in to the cravings for these "bad" foods, you may feel guilty and out of control. You may give up the diet and even binge on the foods you've been missing. This often leads people to develop a painful "love-hate" relationship with food. Of course, most dieters blame themselves when the diet fails, but in reality, dieting itself is to blame.

### **Diets Ignore the Rest of You**

Another problem is that diets and other restrictive means of losing weight don't take the whole person into account. Most diets focus only on your physical being through diet and exercise and deal with the rest by simply saying, "It has to be a lifestyle change" (which usually translates to "You'll be on this diet for the rest of your life!").

However, you are not just a physical being. You have essential emotional, intellectual, and spiritual facets of your life that are all interconnected to your relationship with food. Any diet or weight loss program that doesn't address these other important parts of you (or worse yet, attempts to sever those connections) will ultimately fail, simply because human beings are multidimensional creatures.

Think about your past attempts at weight loss. What went wrong? Did you feel like you were struggling to overcome your urges to eat? If a diet worked temporarily, but failed to provide lasting results, what got in the way? Besides disrupting your body's physiological balance, did your diet seem to clash with other important aspects of your life? Let's explore this idea a little further.

Many people eat or overeat because of environmental triggers such as appealing food, automatic meal times, or learned messages like “clean your plate”. Diets expect you to put blinders on and act as if you can disconnect from the environment in which you live. But when you are on a diet, restaurants, break rooms, holidays, and vacations are full of tempting “bad” foods that you aren't allowed to eat. Most of the time, your family, friends, and co-workers don't have to follow the same rules, so you may feel awkward or left out. While your motivation is high at the beginning of the diet you can deal with it, but in the long run, you may decide that the diet just isn't worth it.

In addition, many of your urges to eat may be triggered by emotions such as stress, boredom, loneliness, sadness, or anger. Since these emotional triggers don't go away simply by imposing a strict set of rules, you may try to cope with them by eating the “allowed foods”. In other words, you never really give up emotional eating or learn other coping skills, so when you give up on the diet, you will go back to eating the way you did before.

### **So What Does Work?**

At this point you are probably thinking, “If diets don't work, what am I supposed to do?” To begin with, if the diet plan you are considering isn't something you can imagine doing for the rest of your life, then don't bother doing it for a day!

It is time to face the fact that the key to solving your struggle with weight and food does not lie in a magical, or even a logical, combination of diet and exercise. The real solution lies in finally addressing your relationship with food, relearning your innate and instinctive eating patterns, and striving toward optimal health rather than some arbitrary weight goal. You must learn to eat in a way that fuels your body, mind, and spirit. The Am I Hungry? Multidimensional Weight Management System can show you how!

*Michelle May, M.D., a Board Certified Family Physician, developed the Am I Hungry?, Multidimensional Weight System (www.AmIHungry.com). She has served as president of the Arizona Academy of Family Physicians and has been active in the American Academy of Family Physicians, the Arizona Medical Association, and many other professional and community organizations. She writes and speaks widely on healthy approaches to weight management. Contact her at MMay@AmIHungry.com or 480 704-7811.*