



HIGH CARBOHYDRATE DIETS

This information is brought to you by many of the Australian nutrition professionals who regularly contribute to the Nutritionists Network ('Nut-Net'), a nutrition email discussion group.

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Eat More Weigh Less (Dr Dean Ornish)

This diet is one of two that have the same name (confusing, isn't it!). Both Dr Ornish and Dr Terry Shintani have chosen this name for their diets, but only the Ornish diet is reviewed here. The name of this diet is based on the concept that if you eat a very high starch/high fibre diet, you can actually eat a greater total weight of food than usual, and still lose body fat. As a result the diet advocates extremely high carbohydrate intake. Following Dr Ornish's advice will lead to approximately the same level of protein consumption as the typical current Western diet, but only about one-third the usual quantity of fat.

The original point of the diet was to try to halt (and even reverse) the process of atherosclerosis (the 'hardening of the arteries' that can eventually trigger heart attacks). Dr Ornish recommends high consumption of 'complex carbohydrates' -- whole grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables -- rather than of simple sugars. This makes the diet very high in volume and fibre (and therefore 'filling') even though total kilojoule intake is relatively low.

Such a diet will very likely induce weight loss, because it has a 'low energy density'; that is, you would have to eat a huge quantity of such foods before your kilojoule requirement could be exceeded. Therefore, putting on weight, or even maintaining a high body weight, would be very difficult on this diet.

Although the diet is not totally vegetarian, Dr Ornish does not include meat (red or white), eggs or fish in his list of recommended foods, and suggests that only low-fat dairy food be consumed. His advice about dairy foods is orthodox, but completely avoiding meat and fish ignores the contribution that these foods can make to intakes of essential minerals such as niacin, iron and magnesium (meat), and the important 'omega-3' fatty acids (fish).

Dr Ornish recognises that there is more to good health and weight control than simply eating a particular diet. He also suggests networking with others who have adopted his diet and providing mutual encouragement. Relaxation and physical activity are also regarded as important. Finally, light alcohol consumption is tolerated. All these are sensible recommendations and are compatible with current, orthodox nutrition principles.

Dr Ornish has published peer-reviewed papers in prestigious medical journals indicating that adherence to his diet, combined with stress reduction and exercise, may be effective in halting the progress of atherosclerosis in heart disease patients, and in treating diabetes. His results even suggest that some of the damage to the heart's arteries can be undone (that is, reversal of atherosclerosis has been observed).

However, much time is required to prepare the types of meals he recommends. With today's busy lifestyle, and with most Western people used to high fat intakes, this diet is probably suitable only for those who already have atherosclerosis or diabetes (and then only when recommended by their doctor or dietitian) or those who have very strong will power and are extremely keen to lose weight or to improve their nutritional status.

Summary

The Dr Ornish 'Eat More Weigh Less' diet is a nutritious and health-promoting diet, although it places inappropriate limits on consumption of meat and dairy products. This diet would very likely achieve the aims of reducing weight and reducing the risk of heart disease in the vast majority of people, but its extreme nature makes long-term compliance unlikely for all but the most strongly motivated.

The McDougall Program for Maximum Weight Loss (Dr John McDougall)

Dr McDougall has written a number of other books including 'The McDougall Program for a Healthy Heart', 'The McDougall Program: 12 Days to Dynamic Health', and 'The New McDougall Cookbook'. Founder of the 'McDougall Plan' for healthy living, this author has been studying and writing about the effects of nutrition on disease for over 30 years' according to his website.

In his books and through his website Dr McDougall advocates a diet that is even higher in carbohydrate than the diet recommended by Dr Ornish. According to Dr McDougall, 'A healthy diet...is more than 80% carbohydrate from nutritious foods -- starches, vegetables and fruits.' This contrasts with the current contribution of ~50% of carbohydrate to total kilojoule intake in Australia, and represents an extreme goal that few people in Western nations are likely to be able to maintain.

Dr McDougall's beliefs on the causes of overweight are orthodox (too much high-fat food, not enough starchy food and insufficient exercise). He recommends greatly increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables (as do all orthodox health authorities). However, he inappropriately advocates eliminating bread initially in the weight loss diet, and believes (wrongly) that most adults in Western nations cannot digest milk. He has also reported that at his clinic, 'average weight loss for overweight men is 5.3 pounds (2.4 kg) in 11 days, and women is about four pounds (1.8 kg) in 11 days'. These rates of weight loss correspond to about 6 kg per month -- a figure that greatly exceeds the rate of 0.5-1.0 kg per month recommended by Nutrition Australia as being safe and sustainable.

Summary

The basic principles Dr McDougall includes in his books and website articles are mostly sound, and his diet would very likely promote health and lead to weight loss, if people could motivate themselves to follow it. But his advice that more than 80% of kilojoule intake should be derived from carbohydrate is extreme and is unlikely to be maintained in the long term by most people in Western nations. Moreover, his advice on rate of weight loss is not in accord with current orthodox recommendations.

The Pritikin Diet (Dr Robert Pritikin)

Like the Eat More Weigh Less diet of Dr Ornish, the first Pritikin diet was devised (by Nathan Pritikin in 1979) as an attempt to markedly reduce the risk of heart disease. A revised plan -- 'The Pritikin Weight Loss Breakthrough' -- was published by Nathan's son Robert in 1991. The revised Pritikin concept is similar to the diet of Dr Ornish, though it also forbids processed grains, and recommends a slightly lower protein intake, with hardly any animal protein, eggs or fats allowed. This diet provides for a similar intake of carbohydrate as does that of Dr McDougall (~80% of kilojoules).

As with the Ornish diet, the diet has been shown to prevent and even reverse atherosclerosis when combined with stress reduction and exercise. The Pritikin diet is basically very healthy (although it ignores the nutritional benefits of lean meat and eggs), but it suffers from the same potential for non-compliance that is likely to apply also to the Ornish and McDougall diets.

Summary

Although placing inappropriate restrictions on lean red meat and dairy products, this diet is health-promoting overall and is likely to reduce both weight and the risk of heart disease. As with other extremely high carbohydrate diets, it may not be well-tolerated by people who are used to relatively high fat intakes.

Eight Weeks to Optimum Health (Dr Andrew Weil)

Dr Andrew Weil is well known in the United States as an advocate of 'integrative medicine' (combining orthodox and alternative medicine) and for his 'Ask Dr Weil' columns (formerly in a magazine called 'Natural Health' and now available on-line). Dr. Weil emphasises the 'fundamentals of health', which he defines as 'diet, exercise and peace of mind'. His recommendations are aimed at what has been termed 'holistic' health. That is, he aims to achieve not just an absence of disease, but 'positive health', including improved immunity against infections, reduced risk of degenerative diseases (such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer) and an 'inner strength and joy'.

Dr Weil believes that diet -- particularly the types of fat that are eaten -- plays a key role in the development of positive health. In agreement with orthodox nutritionists he advocates reducing saturated fat intake, but he also believes that polyunsaturated fats -- specifically corn, safflower, soy, and cottonseed oils -- should be avoided as far as possible. Instead, he recommends using olive oil as the only (or major) fat in the diet.

Dr Weil is correct in that good evidence suggests additional health benefits from increased consumption of olive oil. However, it is equally true that the oils he avoids are better sources of another essential fatty acid (the 'n-6' series) than olive oil. The National Heart Foundation states that fats found in fish, nuts, poly- and mono-unsaturated margarines, cooking oils and salad dressings help lower cholesterol and fight heart disease. So it is at least premature, and potentially inappropriate, for Dr Weil to recommend the exclusive use of olive oil.

In concurrence with orthodox authorities Dr Weil recommends the consumption of lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. This is sound advice. The Australian recommendation is to eat about five serves of vegetables and two of fruit per day (where one serve of vegetables is half a cup of cooked vegetables, and one serve of fruit is a medium size piece of fruit (eg, apple, pear, orange), or two pieces of smaller fruit (eg, apricot, plum)).

Dr Weil does not have a particular diet plan for weight loss, but maintains that the secret to successful weight loss is to 'eat less and exercise more' and to 'make an effort to replace high-fat foods with low-calorie (= low kilojoule) foods like vegetables'. His advice on weight loss is entirely in keeping with orthodox nutrition advice. This advice includes his suggestion to eat mainly low glycaemic index foods. Finally, he advocates moderating alcohol and avoiding artificial sweeteners and synthetic fat substitutes. He regards exercise as being vital to the achievement and maintenance of weight loss.

Most of the remainder of his nutritional advice is 'orthodox', and Dr Weil is actually ahead of much of those in the field with his belief that optimum health and weight control have a spiritual/emotional component. For example, he recommends combating anxiety with relaxation exercises rather than food, and being accepting of your natural body shape if it is not threatening your health. This is in keeping with the World Health Organisation's definition of health as 'a dynamic state of complete physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.

Summary

Dr Weil includes many of his values in his recommendations, not only regarding diet but also regarding non-dietary aspects of health and wellness. However, his recommendation to avoid polyunsaturated fats and to use olive oil as the only (or at least predominant) form of oil in the diet is at least premature.

GutBusters (Dr Garry Egger and Dr Rosemary Stanton)

Available as a book and as a 'six week waist reduction program designed specifically for men', the GutBusters program was developed by a team led by Dr Garry Egger from Deakin University (Australia). The nutritional aspects of the program were devised by dietitian Rosemary Stanton. The program targets men specifically because most diet programs have been designed to appeal to women, even though being overweight or obese is often more dangerous to health for men. This is because men have a greater tendency to put on weight in the abdomen (the area of the 'gut'). Abdominal body fat is strongly associated with increased risk of both heart disease and diabetes. However, although the target audience is men, the principles of GutBusters are just as appropriate for women.

The program informs men of how they can best modify their diet, alcohol intake and activity levels to reduce waist size. Reduction in fat intake (and a corresponding increase in carbohydrate intake) is advocated. Men are asked not to make any changes that they can't make permanently, including changes to alcohol consumption. Rather than banning alcohol, men are encouraged to 'trade off' each drink with extra walking or other physical activity. They are also encouraged not to combine alcohol with fatty foods. The emphasis is on foods that are hearty and filling.

The GutBusters program is very popular, and, unlike many other programs aimed at weight loss, it has been evaluated for its effectiveness in lowering body fat levels. A study reported in 2005 showed a slight but significant drop in average waist circumference among nearly 900 men who took part in the program. There were also self-reported improvements in diet and a reduction in alcohol consumption.

The GutBusters program is a worthwhile and sensible attempt at reducing abdominal body fat, especially in men. It recognises the importance of satisfying people's desires as well as their needs. The book is written in an engaging style and includes many appropriate and amusing cartoons illustrating the points being made. There are also accompanying recipe books.

Summary

The GutBusters program is highly recommended for overweight men (and women) who genuinely want to lose some of the body fat that they have accumulated (especially over the stomach) and keep it off.

****Please note:** Anyone already suffering from heart disease or diabetes (or any other medical condition that may be diet-related) should consult a doctor or dietitian regarding appropriate alterations in diet and lifestyle, and should always follow the advice of a doctor or dietitian rather than that offered here (or elsewhere).

Disclaimer: This material is provided on the basis that it constitutes advice of a general nature only. It is not intended to replace the advice of a physician or a dietitian.