Big Fat Myths: 14 Weight-Loss Myths Busted

Learn the truth about 14 dieting strategies whose benefits are as mythical as Bigfoot, then discover the methods that'll help you slim down for good

The myth: To lose weight, cut carbs or fat

The truth: Most get-thin-fast plans revolve around the idea that is restricting your intake of one particular nutrient. Usually, carbs or fat is the best way to lose weight. But the results of a 2009 New England Journal of Medicine study suggest otherwise. Participants followed one of four calorie-restricted diets with varying amounts of carbs, protein, and fat for two years. After 24 months, all participants had lost about the same amount of weight (just 9lbs).

"This study proves that calories are the most important factor for weight loss," says Tara Gidus, a sports dietitian (dietdiva.com) and marathoner. "To lose weight, you need to take in fewer calories than you burn - regardless of what percentage of carbs, protein, or fat you're eating." Dr. Atkins et al., take note: gimmicky diets distract us from this simple truth.

The myth: You should try to exercise in the fat-burning zone

The truth: The 'fat-burning zone' lies between 50 and 70 percent of your maximum heart rate. When you exercise at this low intensity, your body draws energy from fat. As your heart rate goes up, more energy comes from carbs. So it seems logical that to lose fat, you should keep your heart rate low, says exercise physiologist and running coach Jason Karp (runcoachjason.com). But that's not the case.

"Running at higher intensities causes you to burn a lower percentage of fat calories in favor of carbs," says Karp, "but you use more total calories." And that's the key to slimming down. Plus, as you torch more calories, the amount of fat burned increases. So it pays to pick up the pace.

Of course, lower-intensity exercise still has its place. Long, slow runs build aerobic fitness and endurance. But to kickstart a sluggish metabolism, you need intensity. Karp suggests interval training (condensed runs that combine intense efforts with recovery) because studies have found these workouts burn more calories during and after exercise. "It also cuts down on boredom," he says, "which means it's more likely you'll stick with your program."

The myth: Mini-meals is better than three hearty ones

The truth: So many dieters wrongly believe that eating several small meals throughout the day is a guaranteed way to banish hunger – and eventually blitz that belly. But scientists have not turned up substantial evidence that eating more often helps, according to a research review by scientists at Newcastle University and Griffith University in Australia. A 2009 study of over 10,000 subjects reported that between-meal nibblers were 69 percent more likely to pack on pounds over five years.

Frequent eating only works if you choose nutritious foods and are forever vigilant when controlling portion sizes. After all, it's not hard to turn six small meals into six large ones. Again, it all comes back to calories. "You can eat three times a day or 10 – as long as you have the same calorie intake that will induce weight loss," says Gidus.

Still, runners do need their snacks. Eating something small before heading out for a run, followed by a post-run snack or meal, can improve both your performance and recovery. If you run at lunch, nibble on some dried fruit or yogurt before heading out, and eat a mix of carbs and protein afterward, perhaps something like a turkey sandwich or some salmon and couscous. For the rest of the day, Gidus recommends tuning into your hunger to tell you when to grab a knife and fork.

The myth: Eating at night causes weight gain

The truth: Many runners believe their metabolism plummets later in the day, which is when we often succumb to the temptation of foods that are nutritionally suspect. But a calorie is a calorie no matter when you eat it, says Gidus. "As long as you don't take in more calories than you burn in a day, you won't gain weight." She adds that overeating at 9 pm is actually no more heinous a crime than overeating at 9 pm is. "You may have a slightly higher metabolism earlier in the day, but all things considered, the impact on weight loss is relatively trivial."

If you train in the evening, eating at night has its advantages: "You have to eat a well-balanced meal to encourage recovery, no matter how late it is," says Gidus. As long as you don't gorge yourself, you're not in danger of gaining weight. Common sense, as ever, is essential: if you routinely spend too much time in the evening with tubs of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, you're eventually going to sabotage your efforts.

The myth: Lift light weights with more reps to get toned

The truth: Runners who want to look lean and toned often skip heavy barbells in favor of lighter weights with lots of repetitions. But that won't give you the physique you're after. If you want to get toned, you need larger muscles and less fat. "And challenging your body through heavier lifting is a big part of this equation," says New York-based running coach Monica Vazquez.

A study at Georgia Southern University determined lifting 85 percent of your maximum ability for eight reps burns about twice as many calories in the two hours post-workout, compared with 15 reps at 45 percent max. And don't worry: lifting heftier iron won't transform you into an Arnold Schwarzenegger-alike. Achieving that look requires eating a high-calorie diet and a long-term power-lifting regime – which you won't be doing. "If you're creating a calorie deficit, you simply won't bulk up like a bodybuilder," says Vazquez.

You don't need to give up lighter weights altogether – they do a better job of improving muscular endurance. It's all about striking that optimum balance, says Vasquez. "A solid resistance program should include periods of both high and low reps." She suggests doing higher reps (12-15) and lower weights for about four weeks and then switching to lifting heavier weights for fewer reps (eight to 10). "Alternate monthly after that to keep the stress on the body constantly changing." Muscle responds to resistance,

so if it's too light, you won't see good results. A little bit of pain – or a healthy bit of grunting – is the secret to the correct kind of gain here. "You should struggle to eke out those last few reps," she says.

The myth: You can 'make up' weekend splurges

The truth: The two 'splurge' days represent about 30 percent of the week, so too many slip-ups will put you on bad terms with the scales. Case in point: dieters in a 2008 study dropped pounds during the week but stopped losing weight on the weekend because they overate.

"By feasting on whatever you want on the weekend, you cancel out five days of healthy eating," says Felicia Stoler, nutrition coordinator for the New York City Marathon.

When it comes to shedding pounds, consistency is vital. "Aim to consume a similar number of calories on Tuesday as you would on Saturday," says Stoler. She suggests weighing yourself on Friday and again on Monday. "Any weight gain is a sign you shouldn't have eaten the extra slice of pizza."

The myth: You have to ban 'bad' foods

The truth: Runners trying to slim down often try to cut out all indulgent foods – but eventually, this approach usually backfires. "If you're following an overly restrictive diet, you're more likely to go overboard on your vices," says Lisa Dorfman, author of the Vegetarian Sports Nutrition Guide (£12.99, John Wiley & Sons). A 2009 National Academy of Sciences paper found flip-flopping between a diet that includes sweet treats and one that banishes them (in other words, yo-yo dieting) activates the brain's stress system, making you want to gorge even more.

So before you say sayonara to your favorite foods, ask yourself: "Can I live without cheesecake (or crisps) forever?" The answer is probably no. "Losing pounds and keeping them off," says Dorfman, "depends on learning to balance your diet without depriving yourself, and eating in a way you can maintain." She suggests runners follow an 80-20 rule. "Eat well 80 percent of the time, and allow room for small treats the other 20 percent." As long as you're reducing your overall intake, you don't need to banish any one food from your diet.

The myth: Reduced-fat foods are a healthy choice

The truth: Ironically, eating low-fat foods has helped make the nation's people look more like the Michelin Man. But how has that happened? The truth is that a low-fat or reduced-fat item may have nearly as many calories as a higher-fat version because ingredients like sugar often replace the fat to make the product taste better, says Dorfman. Plus, low-fat foods can still contain unhealthy saturated or trans fats – both of which may increase your risk of heart disease.

What's more, a Journal of Marketing Research study found that people ate 28 percent more chocolate sweets if the treats were portrayed as 'low-fat' rather than 'regular.' The researchers concluded that low-fat labels (like those on biscuits and fruit-flavored yogurts) cause people to underestimate calorie consumption, increase the amount we eat and temper the guilt of polishing off a box of reduced-fat biscuits. "Some people see the term 'fat-free' and use it as a green light to eat as much of it as they want,"

says Dorfman. "This leads to overconsuming calories." And that, you won't be surprised to hear, leads to weight gain. Ta-da!

The myth: Weight lifting will only bulk you up

The truth: Many runners opt to eschew weights for cardio – a bigger calorie burner. They're also afraid of getting bulky while trying to slim down. But Vazquez, who lost 4th 9lbs with strength training, says runners who want to slim down need to pump iron. "It makes you stronger and builds endurance," says Vazquez, "so you can run longer and harder, burning more calories for weight loss." Since muscle is denser than fat, you'll also shave inches off your body and look leaner.

Plus, cutting calories can lead to losing lean body mass, and weightlifting helps preserve muscle, which is more metabolically active than fat. "It takes extra calories just to keep muscle," says Vazquez. In fact, studies suggest strength training may boost resting metabolic rate by as much as seven percent.

The great news is you don't need to eat and sleep on the weights bench at the gym to achieve the results you want. A 2009 study found that as little as 11 minutes of weight training three times a week will boost daily energy expenditure.

The myth: It's possible to spot-reduce fat

The truth: Plenty of runners spend far too much of their gym time trying to spot-reduce fat. You know, the ones doing a zillion crunches in pursuit of rock-solid abs or banging out hundreds of reps on the inner and outer thigh machines to melt away stubborn fat pockets. But they are wasting their time (and considerable efforts) – the plain truth is the only way you can spot-reduce is with liposuction.

"When you exercise, your body taps into energy stores from everywhere, not just one place," says running coach and exercise physiologist Pete McCall. He adds that you raise the risk of suffering an injury by over-exercising one area of your body. "It's good to have a strong core, but too many crunches can over-tighten abdominals and lead to back problems." Instead, put your efforts into better, more effective use, says McCall. He suggests targeting a particular body part no more than three times a week and focusing on a balanced full-body program. "This will help create a calorie deficit, and ultimately that's the only thing that's going to slim those thighs and trim your belly."

The myth: The longer the workout, the better the results

The truth: Running for an hour straight is a great calorie burner and will undoubtedly help runners shed pounds. But you might accrue more fitness and fat loss by occasionally breaking that hour-long workout into two half-hour runs or three 20-minute sessions, says kinesiologist Greg McMillan, an online coach mcmillanrunning.com.

"A person may run at a harder pace if tackling two shorter runs instead of a single longer one," says McMillan, "so the cumulative calorie burn could be greater." This is backed up by a study in the Journal of Applied Physiology, which found that healthy men who performed two separate 30-minute aerobic sessions burned more calories after their workout than a single 60-minute trial.

McMillan often prescribes same-day split sessions to help his clients overcome time constraints and boredom and accumulate the same training volume with less injury risk. He suggests doing a steady-pace, moderate-intensity run for one session and a more intense calorie burner, like interval training or hill running, the second time. Conversely, try a high-intensity morning run followed by an after-work weight-training session.

The myth: Running on empty is a smart way to burn extra fat

The truth: In theory, because your blood sugar and muscle carbohydrate levels are low after an overnight fast, running before breakfast forces your body to use fat as its primary fuel. But this has its downsides. "Exercising on an empty stomach is like trying to run your car without petrol," explains Stoler. "You need carbs in your system to start your engine and to keep it going strong to burn more total calories."

Not only do muscles prefer to run on carbs, but so does your brain. "Exercising with brain fog reduces the intensity and increases injury risk," says Stoler. The best option? Stoler suggests fueling up with 100 to 200 calories (of easily digestible carbs like fruit juice, yogurt, or dried fruit) about 30 minutes before starting a morning workout. This tactic will pay off after your session, too, she adds: "This also cuts down on post-exercise hunger and curbs overeating."

The myth: You can't overcome your genes

The truth: Yes, indeed, some people are simply predisposed to have a slower metabolism than others. Then some put on weight more easily or carry extra pounds in certain areas. But that doesn't mean staying slim is a battle you can't win. It's possible to outsmart your genes and maintain a healthy weight.

Case in point: a 2009 Finnish study published in the International Journal of Obesity tracked 16 same-sex twin pairs (chosen because they had the same genetic make-up) for decades and found that the twin who had been more physically active over 32 years accumulated 50 percent less belly fat than the twin who didn't exercise. The lesson? By running and exercising regularly, you're already a step ahead in winning the battle of the bulge.

The myth: Keeping it off is the easy part

The truth: Many people think maintaining a weight loss is more manageable than losing it in the first place. While that might be true to a point, a 2008 study in the Archives of Internal Medicine proves you have to be diligent if you want all that hard flab-blitzing work to keep paying off. The researchers discovered that overweight subjects who had slimmed down over two years required an average of 40 minutes of exercise per day to sustain a loss of 10 percent or more of their initial body weight. And that was in addition to paying close attention to what they ate. Those who committed less time to sweat it out, or none at all, were more likely to be back where they started sooner or later.

Take a long-term view. "Weight loss is not something that happens, and then you're done with it," says McMillan. "That's why quick-fix programs hardly ever work in the long term." To stay motivated after you drop pounds, join a running group, sign up for cooking lessons or splurge on a trainer who can refresh a stale exercise program.