

General Nutrition

Finding the Best Diet

Finding the best diet for you

People follow specific diets for all types of reasons, such as weight loss, healthier living and environmental concerns, to name a few.

Generally speaking, a healthy diet:

INCLUDES vegetables and fruits, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, lean proteins and nuts.

AVOIDS processed, high-fat and high in sugar foods.

Eating trends come and go, with diets such as plant-based, keto, Atkins and intermittent fasting being more or less popular over the years. But how do you know which diet is right for you?

The reality is that many people feel more comfortable with guidelines. "Before choosing the right diet for you, ask yourself the following questions," recommends Samah Zbibo, Nurse Case Manager at Cigna.

- Does it match my eating style?
- Does it match my exercise level?
- Can I live with it for a long period of time?
- Does it include foods I like, can afford and can prepare?
- Can I still have my favorite foods?
- Do I want a structured plan or one that is more flexible?

"Evaluate diets carefully to find one that's right for you!" Zbibo adds.



Plant-based

A diet based on foods that come from plants with few or no ingredients that come from animals. This includes fruits; vegetables; whole-grains; legumes; nuts and seeds. A plant-based diet can support healthy living at every age and life stage. Many of us would follow this diet out of concern about animal welfare, health benefits, environment concerns and personal preferences.

Note: "Vitamin B12 is not available from plants, so you will need to get this from fortified foods or supplements," says Zbibo.

Plant-based diets include:

- **Lacto-ovo vegetarians:** Eat dairy and eggs but not meat, poultry, nor seafood
- **Ovo-vegetarians:** Eat eggs but avoid all other animal products, such as dairy
- **Lacto-vegetarians:** Eat dairy, but not eggs, meat, poultry, nor seafood
- **Vegans:** Do not eat any animal products, including honey, dairy and eggs
- **Pescatarians:** Eat fish and/or shellfish
- **Semi-vegetarians (or flexitarians):** Eat small amounts of meat, seafood, poultry, eggs and dairy

A common misconception is that plant-based and vegan diets are healthier. However, as highly processed foods are often used as alternatives and substitutes, this isn't always the case. When

following a plant-based or vegan diet, choosing fewer processed foods is key.

Low-carbohydrate

Low-carbohydrate diets restrict carbohydrates, such as those found in sugar foods, pasta and bread while emphasizing foods that are high in fat and protein. It includes healthy non starchy **vegetables**; meat; fish; poultry; full-fat dairy and natural fats (butter, coconut and avocado oils, etc.), while limiting processed foods, refined carbohydrates and sugar.

Studies show that a low carb diet can cause weight loss and improve health. Low carb diets that emphasize healthy sources of carbs, fat and protein may help lower the risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Keto diet

This is a form of low-carb diet, which aims to move the body into ketosis, where it uses fat as its main source of energy. Following this diet has been found to benefit those with type 2 diabetes, as well as children who suffer from epilepsy.¹

Atkins diet

The Atkins diet is another type of low-carb diet that was originally promoted by Dr. Robert C. Atkins in 1972. Since then, people worldwide have used the Atkins diet, and many other books have been written about it.

"It is based on increasing the saturated fat intake so it is very important to speak with your doctor before starting it and monitor yourself throughout," adds Zbibo.

Paleo diet

Dating back to the Paleolithic era, a paleo diet is based on foods that would have been available to hunter gatherers, including fish and lean meats, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds.²

Benefits of the paleo diet include: "weight loss, improved glucose tolerance, better blood pressure

control, lower triglycerides and better appetite management."²

Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet is inspired by the eating habits of people who live near the Mediterranean Sea. It is made up of a moderate to high consumption of fish and seafood, whole grains, nuts, beans, fruit, and vegetables. The diet is also known for including generous amounts of extra-virgin olive oil and a moderate consumption of wine.

It limits amounts of dairy, eggs, and high-sugar foods. Studies have shown that following a Mediterranean diet can lower the risk of heart disease, and improve blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood glucose in those prone to heart disease.¹

Intermittent fasting

Intermittent fasting is not so much about what you eat, but rather about when you eat. With intermittent fasting you only eat during a specific time. Fasting for a certain number of hours can help your body burn fat.

This diet follows a strict eating pattern that switches between periods of fasting and eating. Various methods of fasting include periodic fasting, time-restrictive eating and alternate-day fasting.^{1,3}

While weight loss is considered a key benefit of this diet, common side effects include headaches, mood swings, low energy levels and dizziness. If you've been diagnosed with type-1 diabetes, this diet is not recommended.^{1,3}

Things to consider

"Before starting a diet as part of your weight loss program, speak to your doctor. We are all different and there is no one diet or weight loss program for everyone. But if you consider your preferences, lifestyle and your weight loss goals, you'll likely find a plan that can be tailored to your needs," Zbibo concludes. →

1. Which diet is right for you? The Heart Foundation. <https://www.heartfoundation.org.nz/about-us/news/blogs/which-diet-is-right-for-you>. Accessed April 22, 2022.
2. Paleo diet: What is it and why is it so popular? Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/paleo-diet/art-20111182>. Accessed June 2, 2022.
3. Intermittent fasting. Johns Hopkins Medicine. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/intermittent-fasting-what-is-it-and-how-does-it-work>. Accessed April 22, 2022.



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