



Facts on dieting

Dieting is a common method people choose to lose weight, yet many weight reducing diets are expensive, unbalanced, difficult to follow and do not produce lasting results. Choosing behaviours that support a healthy lifestyle for physical and emotional well-being can be beneficial for anyone. However, 'dieting', as defined below is ineffective for many people and potentially dangerous for some. Dieting has been identified as one of the biggest risk factors for developing (and maintaining) an eating disorder.

Dieting can mean:

- Avoiding eating for long periods of time or starving
- Completely avoiding certain foods or food groups
- Setting up strict and rigid rules around eating in order to control weight or shape.

In our society a range of diets with questionable claims are often marketed to us. Let's take a moment to look at the real facts on dieting:

FACT: Dieting decreases the rate at which the body uses energy

Dieting causes change inside our body as it tries to protect itself. It deals with food shortage by slowing down the rate our body uses energy or calories i.e. it slows down our metabolism. This way, our body can use limited calories more efficiently. So although weight loss may be fairly easy at first, it becomes more difficult to

lose weight as our body adapts. This means the longer you diet, the more your body will fight against further weight loss. Our bodies love routine. By eating regularly and avoiding large gaps between meals, your body will learn to trust that food will be available and therefore won't need to lower your metabolism.

FACT: Dieting leads to muscle and fluid loss

When people go on a diet, their body thinks it is starving and goes into survival mode. When this happens, our body will first use the energy from our carbohydrate stores. These stores hold lots of water, so when they are depleted, fluid is also lost. After this, we start to break down muscle to make fuel for the brain. Our body does not like to use this for energy but is forced to use it during times of restrictive eating. This means the weight that is lost with dieting includes fluid and muscle. Weight loss caused by fluid changes is easy to regain and the loss of muscle lowers our metabolism.

FACT: Strict avoidance of particular foods may induce cravings for that food

Strict and rigid rules/diets are usually impossible to stick to, especially during stressful times. Rigid rules can also make meal times bland and repetitive. Eventually cravings may lead to a 'forbidden food' being eaten and diet rules being broken. This type of approach can result in a cycle of feeling guilty, that you have let yourself down and perhaps telling

yourself that you might as well give up and start dieting again tomorrow. Allowing yourself permission to have a wide variety of foods, including those that may be higher in fat, sugar or salt on occasion can help reduce cravings and stress around meal times.

FACT: The amount of energy or calories people require, vary from person to person.

The amount of energy or calories required by the body each day varies from person to person. It is dependent on your sex, age, weight, activity level, genetics, life events such as pregnancy or breastfeeding and any stress on the body such as an injury or having a high temperature.

FACT: Foods like chocolate, chips, cakes, biscuits, takeaways and margarines are not fattening

No single food or food group causes weight gain. If eaten occasionally or in small amounts, foods with a higher fat, sugar or salt content will not cause weight gain. Even if on some days you eat more than your body requires, your body has the ability to increase your metabolism on these days.

FACT: Fear of food decreases as you learn not to diet

As you learn that a reasonable weight can be maintained by adopting healthy behaviours

around eating and exercise (which includes balance, flexibility and variety), fear of food decreases. It may be helpful to write a list of what foods you are fearful of/your rules and challenge them one by one. Tackling what you fear and managing the distress that comes with this in a healthy way, will give you the best chance of decreasing this anxiety over the longer term. You may find it useful to seek assistance with doing this from an experienced health professional.

FACT: Dieting leaves people feeling unhappy

It is a common myth that dieting will make people happy. In fact, dieting has been linked with an increased chance of depression and lowered self-worth. This can then impact on many areas of our life such as our social interactions and emotional well-being.

FACT: It is possible to break away from dieting behaviour

You don't have to try this alone. With the support of an experienced health professional such as an Accredited Practising Dietitian, it is possible to rebuild a positive relationship with food and restore your health. The body is highly adaptive, and it will be able to again reach its full capabilities in time.

References:

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