

Weight Loss and Dieting Myths

To achieve and maintain a successful weight loss, people have to change both their thinking and their behaviours. Often it is our thoughts that influence our behaviour. This is why we have to ensure that we dispel any thoughts that are negative, irrational or incorrect, which consequently can get in the way of a weight loss patient/client changing their eating behaviour.

During my time as a nutritionist, I have come across a number of myths and fallacies that patients believe to be true. The implication of this is that patients then focus too much on believing and practicing things that are simply not scientifically/medically correct and end up sabotaging their weight loss efforts.

Below are 10 of the most common weight loss/dieting myths that I have come across over the years.

1. I can't eat more than a few eggs each week as they raise my cholesterol

Contrary to popular belief, foods containing cholesterol like eggs, do not significantly influence blood cholesterol levels. It is the type of fat in the diet which significantly affects your cholesterol levels. Saturated or 'bad' fats like butter, lard biscuits, cakes, pastries and fatty meats are the common culprits that you need to watch.

There is no recommended limit on how many eggs people should eat. Eggs are a good choice as part of a healthy balanced diet.

2. I hate fruit and vegetables, but I will be okay if I just take a vitamin and mineral supplement

Vitamin and Mineral supplements should be used to *supplement* the foods in our diet not replace them. Vitamins and Mineral supplements do not contain the range of important phytochemicals and fibre that contribute to fruit and vegetables being so healthy and protective of diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and indeed obesity.

Typically for most of us, providing we are taking a balanced and varied diet we get all the nutrients we need from food without supplementation.

3. I'm overweight/obese because I have a slow metabolism

A lot of people take comfort and indeed get complacent with their weight on the belief that they are overweight or obese because they have a slow metabolism and therefore there is nothing they can do to lose weight. Well the facts are quite the contrary. Your metabolism or your metabolic rate is essentially the amount of calories you expend or 'burn' each day. I often use the analogy of a car to explain this. The same way that a larger car would burn more fuel whether stationary with the engine ticking over or during movement is the same way that a heavier person would burn more calories whether sitting down and resting or during movement or exercise. A heavier person just like a larger car needs more energy to fuel the heavier mass. Therefore actually overweight or obese people have a higher metabolism than 'normal' weight people not lower.

4. Carbohydrates are fattening, so I don't eat things like bread, pasta or rice

High protein, low carbohydrate diets are all the rage now. People who are trying to manage their weight stay clear of carbohydrates in fear that they are going to put on weight. A calorie is a calorie is a calorie! So regardless of the food source or food group, if you take in more calories than your body requires, you will put on weight. Some people do lose weight when they eliminate carbohydrates from the diet, but given that typically 50% of our intake is made up of carbohydrates, it stands to reason that you will lose weight, but this is not because of the carbohydrate itself but more because of the reduction in your daily calorie intake. It is worth pointing out to all the high protein/low carbohydrate diet fans that gram for gram carbohydrates contain the same amount of calories as protein. Given that carbohydrates provide us with a good and essential source of nutrients (that we cannot always get from protein!) it would be better to moderate the portions of carbohydrates rather than cut them out altogether.

5. Eating late at night causes me to put on weight

In terms of weight loss it does not matter what time of day you eat your meals, what matters is the amount of calories you consume over the course of the day, and if you consume more calories than your body requires you will put on weight. A calorie is a calorie is a calorie regardless of what the food is and when it is eaten. Of course if you eat a lot of extra calories at night (or during the day) you will be at an increased risk of putting on weight. Do our bodies really recognise what time of day it is to say 'it's late I am going to store more fat'? Eating late at night will probably just make you have a bit of an uncomfortable nights sleep.

6. The recommended 1.5 -2 litres per day should only be made up of water only

In temperate climates like here in the UK, it is suggested that most of us need 1.5 – 2 litres of fluid (six to eight glasses) to prevent us getting dehydrated. However this fluid does not just have to be water, it can include milk, squashes, fruit juice, teas and coffee, and even alcoholic drinks like wine spritzers and Gin and Tonic can contribute to your recommended fluid intake! In terms of preventing dehydration is it the volume of fluid that is important, not the type of fluid. However, and it is a big however, high sugar drinks like soft drinks (coke), fruit juice, smoothies and of course alcohol, are not only bad for your teeth, but if drank frequently can cause weight gain because of the high calorie content. You can't really go wrong health wise or weight wise with water whether this is bottled, filtered or straight from the tap.

7. Healthy fats like sunflower oil and olive oil contain less calories than butter or lard

The only difference between fats like sunflower oils/spreads and olive oil and fats like butter is the type of fat they contain. Sunflower oil and olive oil tend to be high in healthy fats like polyunsaturates and monounsaturates whilst butter and fats like lard tend to be lower in these healthy fats and higher in unhealthy fats like saturates. It is not the difference in calorie content that

determines whether the fats are healthy or unhealthy, it is the different impact they have on cardiovascular health. Polyunsaturates and monounsaturates are good for cardiovascular health whilst saturates are bad for cardiovascular health. However, with regards to calories whether the fat is a 'good' fat or a 'bad' fat, gram for gram they still have the same amount of calories, so sunflower oil and olive oil are equally as fattening as butter. The general recommendation therefore is that for heart health you should aim to go for the healthier fats like sunflower spreads and oils and olive oil, and reduce the intake of saturated fats, but overall for weight management, because of the high calorie content, you should use ALL fats sparingly and consume them in moderation.

8. Drinking ice cold water speeds up your metabolism

This concept is related to the idea that if you drink extremely cold water, your body has to burn calories warming it up. This may be technically correct but the amount is so tiny and insignificant that you cannot put any reliance on drinking icy cold water to help you lose weight. So the advice would be if you like ice cold water then drink it, if you don't, then don't!

9. Low fat/reduced fat foods are virtually calorie free

We should first distinguish here between low fat and reduced fat. Low fat indicates that the food contains less than 3g fat per 100g/100ml. If a food is labelled as reduced fat, it means that the food must contain 30% less fat than that of a similar standard product, but this does not mean the product is low fat! For instance if a product is already very high in fat, a 30% reduction will still leave a high fat content.

In addition, foods labelled low fat/reduced fat are not necessarily low in calories as the fat can often be replaced with other ingredients like sugar to improve the taste and texture profile and therefore the product ends up being a low or reduced fat food but still with a high calorie content, and ultimately weight loss is predominantly about calories!

10. There are some foods like grapefruit and cabbage that can help to burn fat and boost your metabolism

I believe this myth has been born from typical fad diets like the Grapefruit Diet and the Cabbage Soup diet which has undoubtedly helped lots of people to lose weight. To put simply, no food significantly increases your metabolism to burn fat. The weight loss effect experienced by these dieters would have been down to the overall reduced calorie intake not the effects of the grapefruit or cabbage itself. A low calorie diet of any kind would have had the same effect as the Grapefruit and Cabbage Soup diet.