

# Diet Confusion: Ten Popular Myths Examined

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PUT DOWN THE DETOX TEA AND FILL UP THE FRUIT BOWL - SANDIE FREDRIKSSON DEBUNKS SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AROUND WHAT AND HOW TO EAT TO LOSE WEIGHT.

It's no surprise that diet myths spread like wildfire. We so desperately want to believe that a simple change like cutting out sugar or drinking 'tummy-flattening' tea is the secret to easy weight loss. But can it really be that simple?

Traditionally, the word 'diet' refers to 'the type of food a person or community habitually eats'. For many of us forty-somethings, however, the word 'diet' has never meant anything but a prescribed way of eating with the goal of losing weight. The relentless pressure of 'eat this, not that' rules and the prospect of a lifetime of restrictions adding an extra layer of complexity to our already busy lives.

Labelling foods as inherently 'good or bad' or 'allowed or off-limits' is not just intellectually lazy, but could mean the post-dinner chocolate fudge cake comes with a side order of guilt and a dollop of shame. The truth is you don't have to write off having a dessert in order to lose weight, but you do need to understand the fundamental principle of energy balance.

Despite what you see on Instagram or hear from a well-intentioned friend, the only way to lose fat is to be in a calorie deficit. The principle is simple - consume fewer calories than you burn - but working out how to implement a calorie deficit in a way that you can stick to may not be so straightforward. Meeting all your body's nutritional needs whilst still including foods you love does require some planning, but taking the time to do this will also empower you to see diet misconceptions and hearsay for what they really are.

# Here are the ten most common weight-loss myths I get asked about, how to better understand them and how to rethink them.

## *1 Avoid fruit because it is high in sugar*

It's true, fruit is relatively higher in naturally occurring sugar (fructose) compared to vegetables, which is possibly where this dieting myth takes root. But as with vegetables, the calories in fruit primarily come from carbohydrates, and it's the calories that count for fat loss, not sugar. Fresh whole fruits are an excellent source of vitamins, minerals and fibre, and gram for gram, they are likely to be lower in calories compared to other foods that satisfy sweet cravings. Making a 400g punnet of strawberries (120 calories) or half a kilo of watermelon (150 calories) a filling and low-calorie choice. One caveat to this diet myth is avocado. Thanks to its (healthy) monounsaturated fat content a medium avocado racks up a hefty 250 calories, which is why I usually recommend that eating half a day is plenty. If you're aiming for fat loss, whatever fruits you consume need to be in the context of your overall calorie target.

## *2 Juice fasts are a speedy fat loss hack*

Cleverly-marketed juice plans and retreats have become increasingly popular, thanks to the impressive amount of 'weight loss' they produce on the scales, but sadly it's unlikely to translate into dropping a dress size. That's because the majority of the weight you are so excited about shedding is water and precious muscle, and less so body fat. We gradually lose muscle mass as we age (sarcopenia) so if having a toned body is something you strive for, I recommend staying away from any type of dieting strategy devoid of protein. What a quick-fix juice fast also fails to do is set you up with a sustainable plan going forward. You're likely to feel ravenous once the juice fast is over as your body compels you to replenish all the nutrients it's been deprived of. Yes, restricting yourself to as little as 1000 calories a day of juice does create a significant calorie deficit, but it's important to remember that you need a minimum of 1200 calories a day to avoid nutrient deficiencies and other negative effects on your body. Wouldn't you rather adopt a strategy that feels freeing and joyful, while keeping your body toned and boosting your metabolism?

## *3 Replace lunch with a juice, shake or smoothie*

Unless it's water, whatever you drink still counts towards your daily calorie intake and a glass of juice will contain the same amount of calories as the whole vegetables or fruits you used to make it. Juicing also means removing the plant fibre which you need to slow down the absorption of sugar into your bloodstream. Experiencing the highs and lows of the blood sugar rollercoaster can very quickly leave you hungrier than you were before. Another often overlooked benefit of plant fibre is its prebiotic role of feeding the good bacteria in your gut, which is why we should take every opportunity to consume it. Fibre-filled smoothies are a better option if you occasionally prefer to drink your calories rather than eat them, but be sure to throw in some nuts and seeds and perhaps some protein powder to keep you feeling fuller for longer.

## *4 Low carb is the best diet strategy to go for*

The weight-loss industry does an impressive job of dressing up the calorie deficit principle with a variety of different methods, low carb being one of the most popular. If you are limiting an entire macronutrient food group that includes pasta, bread and potatoes, of course you will make a hefty dent in the calories that you are consuming! The weight you lose on a low carb diet isn't down to the lack of carbs; it's down to the calorie deficit. The amount of calories you consume is what matters, not which macronutrients those calories come from.

## *5 Eliminate sugar if you want to lose weight*

Unless you are someone who likes to eat sugar cubes, demonising sugar is a misleading and simplistic statement. It's not sugar that makes you fat, it's the over-consumption of highly palatable, high-calorie foods that contain it. Whether it's cheesecake, biscuits or ice cream, these foods are not only calorific but are also cleverly constructed to make you want more of them. Most of us need a 'food hug' from time to time (me included!) but anything more regular makes these treats an obvious culprit for excessive calories and gradual weight gain.

## *6 The treats you love are completely off-limits*

Dieting should never feel overly restrictive so forget the idea you need to suffer and feel miserable. Fat loss requires being in a calorie deficit over a sustainable period of time, so you're better off finding a strategy that feels permissive rather than prohibitive. Don't turn down your friend's party invitation or decline a slice of birthday cake, even though you want it. Instead, consider the calories in the treats you're going to be enjoying and look to adjust your calories earlier in the day, or even earlier in the week. Alternatively, enjoy the celebrations without any guilt whatsoever and hop right back to your calorie deficit strategy at the next opportunity. Unless you prioritise your mental health, you won't be able to experience the positive feelings you're hoping will come from losing the weight. Focus on maximising nutrient-dense foods and minimising feelings of deprivation whilst doing your best to keep to your calorie target. Even if it means you need to be a little more patient.

## *7 Skinny teas are a fat-burning miracle*

Despite what some influencers have proclaimed on social media, there are no magic potions or powders that will burn fat from your body. Evidence suggests that a coffee before a gym session might increase your effort, and that a shot of apple cider vinegar can suppress your appetite. But these are just ways to support a calorie deficit strategy, not a solution by themselves. One liquid habit I do recommend building is staying properly hydrated. Dehydration can fool you into thinking you're hungry, when in fact it's water your body is craving.

## *8 Eating 'clean' ensures you get slimmer*

Shifting your focus from dieting to healthy eating can be a helpful strategy for fat loss, but that doesn't mean that simply eating 'clean' correlates to weight loss. It's important to recognise that you can still expand your waistline eating nothing but nutrient-dense foods if you're consistently eating in a calorie surplus. A nutritious diet is important for your health, but it's energy balance that matters when it comes to managing your weight. You need to pay attention to both. Dried fruits are a good example. Stripped of its water content, 100g of banana chips contains 500 calories compared to the 90 calories in 100g of fresh banana, making it a calorific snack, though not an unhealthy one. Nuts and seeds are also high in calories, so consume these nutrition-packed powerhouses in moderation if fat loss is your goal.

## *9 Intermittent fasting guarantees weight loss*

There are many diets based around cycles of eating and fasting; 16:8, 5:2, alternate day, the warrior diet. Mounting research links fasting to improved health and living longer, primarily through triggering a process called autophagy (the body's way of clearing out damaged cells and replacing them new ones) but that doesn't automatically equate to weight loss. The reason fasting aids weight loss is simply because it shortens your eating window, and most people will consume fewer calories if they have less hours within which they can eat. Personally, I don't like to eat before noon and I have a 'dinner and done' rule that means I don't eat past 8pm. But that plan won't appeal to you if you can't start your day without breakfast.

## *10 Quit alcohol if fat loss is your goal*

Tracking the calories you eat while turning a blind eye to the calories in your evening pinot is an easy mistake to make, but you don't have to cut out alcohol entirely. If one glass of wine with friends at the weekend is something you look forward to then enjoy it guilt-free and know that it won't have a substantial impact. But having a glass of wine every night will. And it's not just the calories in the alcohol that can derail you if a couple of glasses of wine makes it harder to resist the Doritos.

*The success of any fat loss strategy relies on long-term adherence, so don't make things harder for yourself by following an arbitrary set of rules with no scientific clout. There is no such thing as a bad food when it comes to fat loss, only an overconsumption of calories over time. Arm yourself with this simple and practical perspective so you can make more informed choices and still enjoy the foods you love.*

### Five weight loss truths

Here are some rules you can trust and that will work for everyone.

Calculate your calorie deficit but keep it modest and add a side of patience. This creates space for the treats you enjoy, which will improve your chances of long term success.

Prioritise protein aiming for a minimum of 1g per Kg of body weight per day. Digesting protein burns around 30% of its calories, plus dietary protein keeps you feeling full for longer and helps preserve precious muscle mass.

Choose resistance training over cardio for fat loss. This will not only tone your body but it will also raise your metabolism. Run, walk and cycle for health, fitness and fun rather than relying on it as a weight-loss strategy.

Value progress, consistency and above all resilience. Build sustainable habits and remember that failure is part of the process.

Recognise the importance of managing stress and quality sleep for fat loss. Learning techniques to improve both will increase your chances of sticking to your weight loss plan.



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