- Nutrition

How to spot fake or potentially harmful diets

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Last year, we had a middleage female diabetic patient confined after she tried one of the so-called fad diets to lose weight—without the supervision of physician.



She shed excess poundage but her blood sugar went down to critically low levels (severe hypoglycemia), which caused her to develop a potentially serious irregular heart rhythm.

She also had seizures and almost lapsed into a coma. Her pills to lower blood sugar should have been adjusted to prevent the life-threatening hypoglycemia.

Dr. Joy Arabelle Fontanilla, an adult endocrinologist who heads the Center for Weight Intervention and Nutrition Services at St. Luke's Medical Center Global City, and the Nutrition Committee at Asian Hospital, warns that some quick-fix diets may do more harm than good.

Therefore, it's important to sort out the accurate and factual from the unfounded and erroneous claims of many of these restrictive diets.

Restrictive

Fad diets are usually very restrictive, and limit nutritional intake to a few foods or an unusual combination of foods.

In her recent article in H&L (Health and Lifestyle) magazine, Dr. Fontanilla explains that fad diets frequently eliminate entire food groups like carbohydrates, and may substitute it with more fats or proteins.

Advocates of some of these diets also recommend expensive ingredients or supplements, which usually have no scientific evidence to back them up.

"Cutting whole food groups like carbohydrates could lead to a lack of vital nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, fiber and antioxidants," Fontanilla warns. "Taking these dietary shortcuts may be quick fixes for weight loss but could lead to huge health problems in the long run."

There's a lot of dietary gurus in media giving all sorts of recommendations. It can really be a challenge to sort out the fake from the factual in these fad diets.

Fontanilla cites pointers from the British Dietetic Association and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics on how to spot bad or fake diets.

Watch out The diets assure you there's

no need for exercise. Nothing can be farther from the truth because physical activity is crucial in overall fitness and weight maintenance. Reducing one's caloric intake is important for weight loss, but exercise plays a big role in maintaining weight loss and preserving muscle mass, Fontanilla explains.

Good evidence shows that exercise helps boost mood, lowers blood pressure, bad cholesterol and sugar levels. The diets recommend a

rigid regimen. This can lead to an insufficiency of essential nutrients like vitamins and minerals. This can weaken the immune system, making one susceptible to infections and other diseases.

Fontanilla advises against diets recommending avoidance of staple food like grains, dairy (e.g., ketogenic diet and paleo diets) or all cooked food (raw food diet), as well as diets advocating intake of just one type of food (e.g., cabbages, chocolates, eggs).

The diets promote a tailorfit "magic combination" with little science. One should avoid dietary combinations which are supposed to be suitable to one's blood or genetic type.

"Most of these claims are supported by flimsy evidence like celebrity endorsements, anecdotes, a single study or studies not subjected to peer review," says Fontanilla. The diets claim rapid weight loss is very safe. The truth is that rapid weight loss can possibly lead to gallstones, dehydration and drop in blood

Why some quick-fix diets do more harm than good

pressure, malnutrition, muscle loss and electrolyte imbalance such as very low potassium levels that can lead to cardiac arrhythmias and even sudden cardiac arrest.

What's ideal is a gradual, steady weight reduction of 1 to 2 pounds a week. The important thing is to sustain the diet and the steady weight loss.

Crash diets are difficult to sustain in the long term and can cause a yo-yo pattern in which the weight goes up and down.

Rational dieting

"Basically, a diet will work as long as you stick to it," advises Fontanilla. Choose a healthy, rational diet one can live with for the rest of his/her life.

Rather than try the fad diets, Fontanilla recommends consistently eating healthy, which can be fun and satisfying, too. She gives these pointers: •

Eat the food you love in small portions. Use smaller plates. •
Keep serving platters away from the dinner table. •
Fill up on fiber-rich vegetables and fruits instead of sweets. •
Keep a food diary. People who keep track of their calorie intake are more likely to succeed at weight loss. •
Eat balanced meals with a healthy variety of food from different food groups. •
Choose healthy fats such as olive oil, fatty fish, nuts and avocado rather than saturated fat from animal sources like beef or pork and trans fats from processed or deep-fried foods like french fries, fast food, biscuits, crackers and cookies. •
Pick whole grains like rolled oats, brown rice, whole grain bread rather than white rice, white bread and donuts. •
Say no to sugar-sweetened drinks. •
Stay active. Walk, jog, bike, play, swim, dance or zumba at least 30 minutes a day.
Lastly, Fontanilla reminds us that an effective diet for weight reduction is not a one-size-fits-all regimen. “Some people lose weight on a particular diet, while others don’t.”
It’s best to consult a healthcare professional for guidance, especially if one has other health issues like diabetes and heart disease.
“You can survive a fashion faux pas but maybe not a fad diet. If the dietary claim sounds too good to be true, it probably is (not true),” she says.