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Debunking dieting myths

C HEALTHY NOW

BY GREG ROTHMAN, M.S. P.T.

I can tell that the holiday season is fast approaching, because I've started to get emails and phone calls asking me which diet is the best for weight loss prior to the start of the season of over-indulgence. People still want to know about the Atkin's Diet, the South Beach Diet and the newer Hamptons Diet (and other diets named after fashionable places).

For well over a century, diets have been built on the concept of cutting calories. This is a flawed technology, and yet it is the foundation on which just about all popular diets are built. Let me put it very simply: Cutting calories does not lead to fat loss.

Here's why: Your body was designed to protect itself. When you eat fewer calories than is necessary to maintain metabolism, your body protects you by slowing your metabolism down. When this happens, your body will begin to break apart muscle tissue and use it to produce energy.

This does lead to a quick decrease in body weight, but this is due to muscle loss and dehydration. Since muscle is metabolically active tissue and you now have less of it, your metabolism will be slower and your body will burn fewer calories than it did before you went on the diet. In other words, the number of calories that used to be required to maintain your body weight will now lead to fat gains, and your body will store fat with more efficiency, a double-whammy.

But that's not all. Continuing on the diet will lead to changes in hormone production that cause your body to create more lipoprotein lipase (an enzyme that stores body fat). Calorie deprivation also causes changes in the way neurotransmitters in your brain function, creating strong cravings for fats and sugars. Eventually, even the most steadfast dieter gives in and goes off the diet. This actually has little to do with will-power. It is the body's way of saying: "Eat! You are depriving yourself of the nutrients you need."

While it may be tempting to use calorie-cutting diets to lose weight, just look at history: As diets have become more popular in America, Americans have become fatter than ever. The diet industry is a \$50 billion-a-year behemoth that succeeds (financially) by failing to fulfill the promises it makes. It's a bit like the planned obsolescence built into the electronics industry: It causes you to always be looking for the next innovation. Think about it: If diets like these actually worked, they would have worked the first time and you would not be looking for the next one.

In addition to diets, in their quest for weight loss people are also turning to pills. I've gotten dozens of emails asking about the next 'miracle breakthrough.' The following is part of an email I recently received from a visitor to my Website.

Q: I've tried Cortislim in the past, and it didn't really work very well for me. I've been reading about some collagen protein supplements, and they seem good. I wonder if it is dangerous to combine the two?

My answer to questions like these often surprises people, because the marketing of these products is so sophisticated that people believe these products safe—and guaranteed to work.

Take Cortislim. The main ingredients are green tea and bitter orange (synephrine). When it became clear that ephedrine was dangerous, potentially deadly, the market-

ers of products that contain this ingredient rushed to find a replacement—and came up with synephrine. Why? Because they were making billions of dollars every year selling these products. Cortislim, then, is essentially caffeine and speed.

The collagen protein supplements are marketed under various names. These supplements are mostly made from collagen gelatin, which is the primary ingredient in Jell-O. An additional "safe and effective" ingredient is aloe vera (which soothes sunburns topically, but works as a laxative when ingested). My recommendation then, instead of spending money on collagen proteins, would be to eat a bowl of Jell-O and take an Ex-Lax tablet. The effect, although it may not be pleasant, would likely be the same.

It should be noted that FDA actions have been taken against Cortislim and sellers of collagen proteins for deceptive and fraudulent marketing, and there are several federal criminal cases pending.

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Our desire to find the quick fix, the magic bullet that will melt away all of our fat, is understandable against the backdrop of American culture. For this reason, it is hard to compete with the marketers of these products. They make billions and have deep pockets. They can spend extraordinary sums of money that allows them to conduct "research" that points to the conclusions that benefit them, like the tail wagging the dog. They can afford air time and produce slick commercials that have us dialing their 800 numbers with credit cards in hand.

The real solutions are less desirable because they are not very sexy. They require consistent application of principles that work: Making an effort to eat in a more healthful and supportive way, participating in an exercise program that includes strength-training to build lean muscle and moderate cardiovascular exercise to burn off excess calories.

When they do invent a pill that makes us all strong and lean without any effort, I'll be the first person standing on a soapbox shouting its benefits. Until then, you'll find me choosing fresh produce at the farmer's markets and in my gym teaching people how to exercise safely and efficiently. Look for me there.

Greg Rothman, M.S. P.T., is the owner of emPower Fitness Studios (emPowerFitnessNYC.com). He received his masters degree in physical therapy from Columbia University and has 15 years' experience in the rehabilitation and fitness fields, most recently as the personal training manager and top-level trainer for Equinox Fitness Clubs in New York City. SEND YOUR QUESTIONS about nutrition, fitness and sports injuries/rehabilitation to Greg at emPowerFitness@aol.com.

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