

Finding the Right Diet

Choose a plan you can follow

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"Proven weight loss" is a claim often made by weight loss programs. Yet two recent studies of different weight loss programs show that the program is less important than how well you stick with whichever one you choose. These studies also underline why you should select an approach that will enhance your overall health.

The reports of the two studies appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. They illustrate how widely different current diets can be. Some emphasize low-fat eating, while others limit carbohydrates. Some commercial programs, like Jenny Craig, rely on pre-packaged meals to control eating, while popular diets, like Atkins, Zone or Weight Watchers, use eating plans—some more detailed and structured than others.

The study that looked at popular diets showed that the average weight loss was 4.6 to 7 pounds after one year. This average amount factors in the large 40 to 50 percent of people who quit within the year. If you only look at those who followed a diet for the full year, weight loss averaged 8.5 to 14.5 pounds. These actual losses appear small compared to the advertising claims of the diets. Furthermore, calorie consumption declined only 140 to 250 calories a day from initial levels. Looking at average losses can also hide the wide variation people had within each diet. Some dieters lost over 20 pounds, while others actually gained weight on the same diet during the course of the year.

The study that examined commercial weight loss programs discovered that most lack well-controlled studies supporting their claims. The one program with any solid research showed that typically people lost about five percent of their weight over three to six months. Special programs with extremely low calorie levels promoted faster weight loss, but their dropout rates were high, and those who continued frequently regained most of what they lost.

The high numbers of people falling off diets in these two studies show how important it is to find a weight loss approach you can live with. The most talked about diet is useless if you can't stick with it. Support from a group of fellow dieters or a professional dietitian can make a big difference in your effort, but you'll probably need repeated meetings.

A major obstacle for most people who want to lose weight is thinking in strictly black and white terms. If they can't follow a diet perfectly, they give up in frustration. But these two studies show that weight loss success does not require 100 percent adherence. Following even 60 percent of any diet brought weight loss. Certainly, if you fail to change any of your habits, you shouldn't expect to lose any weight. But if you are ready to make some changes, the evidence suggests that you can still be successful with these partial improvements. Similarly, a study on the dietary guidelines of the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) to lower cancer risk confirms that the more guidelines people follow, the lower their cancer risk. Yet following only some guidelines still reduces risk significantly.

Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight offers enormous health benefits. Although many overweight people are unlikely to reach an ideal weight range through dieting, even small weight drops are beneficial. The eating changes you make to lose weight can impact your health directly by increasing your consumption of fiber, vitamins and phytochemicals, while decreasing your fat intake. So, instead of focusing on the claims and promises of popular diets or programs, look for healthy changes you can make and realistically learn to keep.