

By Dr. Mike Evans

Four diet myths and one good food habit

There's no magic formula for weight loss. All macronutrients come in good and bad forms.



Sticking to the outer aisles of the grocery store will help prevent weight gain. (EMILIO MORENATTI / AP)

Here are four things about healthy eating that need clearing up.

One diet works better than the others.

False. Head-to-head studies of commercial diets don't reveal a winner. Diets mostly work about the same. When they succeed, it's because the dieter was able to stick to the plan. Put another way: it's not the diet; it's you. Diets are "food rules" that help you eat fewer calories when you face food decisions. They work for most people initially but only about one in six are able to keep the weight off.

You can melt off pounds by tinkering with carbs, protein, fats etc.

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I think this just causes confusion and diverts us from the real issues. There's no magic formula for weight loss. All macronutrients come in good and bad forms. Complex carbs such as fruit, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains are healthy — while in their simple form, free sugars and refined starches, are less healthy if you eat too much of them. Trans fats are bad, but saturated fats seem OK in moderation and certain fats, such as those found in avocados, olive oil, fish, nuts and seeds, seem to make us healthier. Proteins can come in unhealthy packages (think salty ham steak) but most data shows that eating healthy protein (white meat, nuts, beans, fish, etc.) helps manage your weight.

Focus less on a magic formula of macronutrients and more on eating the higher quality options — and on eating less overall. Carbs taste awesome, so we eat too many of them. If we restrict our carbs most of us lose weight, not because of the carbs, but rather because we stop overeating.

Come on. There must be one diet that works.

Yes. The “diet” with the strongest evidence does not have a celebrity book behind it, and is not about carbs or protein. In fact, it's not a diet at all. It's a way of life — one that's not focused on weight loss but on healthy outcomes like reducing the risk of cancer, heart disease, and dementia, and promoting a longer life. The diet with the most robust evidence is the Mediterranean diet. Instead of food rules or absolutes, this is more about moderation: less meat, more veggies, and fruit for dessert. In this way of life, people shop for single-ingredient food at the market or the outer aisles of a grocery store, not the processed foods for sale in the inner aisles.

Trying really hard should pay off, right?

Not for long. For permanent weight loss, we need to keep the changes easy. We need to move from mindless overeating towards mindless healthy eating. I call it “choice architecture.”

Very few people can overhaul their entire lifestyle and make that stick. But what if we just started by looking at our average week and made one small change. A friend recently switched from having a bagel or muffin for breakfast to oatmeal. As a result, he's lost 15 pounds this year.

Make good food a habit

Practise defensive snacking — always have a small bag of nuts, chopped fruit or veggies on hand at work or in the car.

We don't have endless willpower so its time to switch from motivation to facilitation — i.e., make it easier to do the right thing. When you look at your average week: eating out, coffee shops, grocery store, food on the counter in your kitchen, and so on, can you make a small change? Kids and adults tend to inhale food when they get home before dinner. They will eat whatever is fast and available — which tends not to be healthy. Why not anticipate this with healthy snacks like pre-cut and washed fruit and veggies in the front of the fridge?

Think about your bigger picture. Many of us are emotional eaters. If you overeat to comfort yourself, consider therapy as this could be a double win. For some people, it's genetic. Others do it as a way of coping with traumatic experiences. But it's best not to struggle with the problem alone.

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I've got a few other ideas for how we can turn mindful food choices into mindless eating behaviour, but I'd really like to hear from you. On Thursday Nov. 19 at noon, I'm hosting a live, hour-long web chat on the home page of [the Toronto Star website](#). (You can also join the conversation on Twitter Thursday with #AskMikeEvans.)

Please join me to share your ideas about what does and doesn't work for you in the effort to eat well and manage your weight. Health providers and patients need to work together to turn around this crisis, and improve health. I look forward to hearing from you.

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