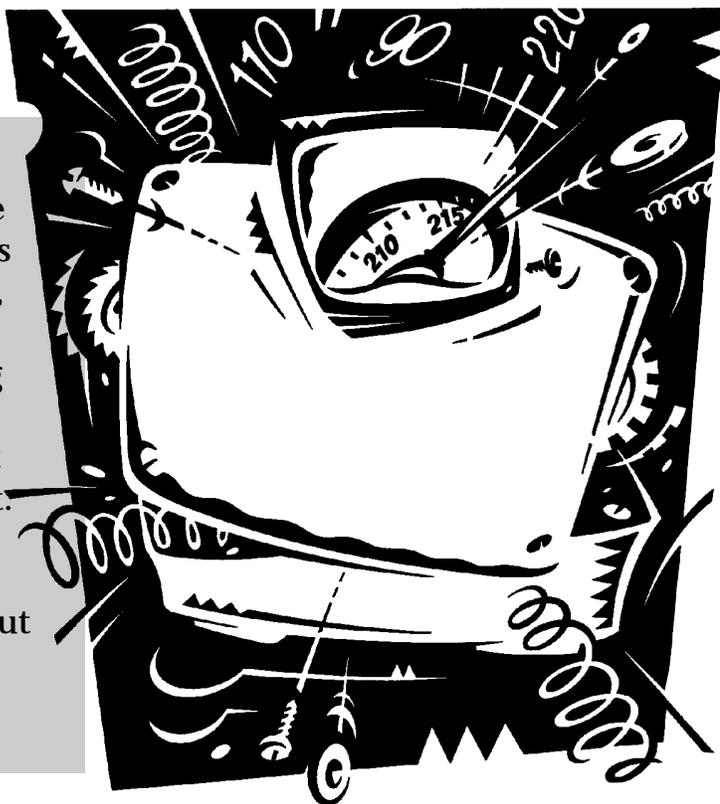


## Weight Control Questions and Answers

**A**re you confused by all the diet books, magazine articles, and news reports about how to lose weight? If so, you are not alone. Consumers are often exposed to misleading information about dieting and receive conflicting advice about what to eat and what not to eat. This fact sheet provides reliable answers to some commonly asked questions about food, nutrition, exercise, and weight control.



### Diets

**Q: Does weight loss through dieting only have short-term effects?**

**A:** It does not have to, but it often does. Many people lose weight, only to regain it, and in some cases they even gain more. Experts tell us that daily eating and activity habits need to be changed permanently to keep lost weight off.

**Q: Does a sound weight-loss plan advocate a food intake of less than 800 calories per day?**

**A:** No. Except on the advice of a physician, no one should consume less than 800 calories

per day because it is difficult to obtain the necessary nutrients. A suggested minimum daily caloric intake, at which many people will lose weight, is about 1,200 calories per day. Children and teenagers should not diet too rigorously without professional supervision because they are actively growing.

**Q: Does the proportion of protein, fat, and carbohydrate in a diet make a difference in the speed with which weight is lost?**

**A:** Yes. Despite popular books and diet plans that advise restricting carbohydrates, a weight-reducing diet should be relatively high in carbohydrate and low in fat.

Ounce for ounce, fat has more than twice the number of calories as carbohydrate. Also, the body burns up more calories in processing carbohydrate than it does in processing fat. The caloric composition of a healthy diet should be at least 55 percent carbohydrate, about 15 percent protein, and no more than 30 percent fat. For most adults, the less fat the better. Diets in which carbohydrates are very low (ketogenic diets) often result in rapid weight loss, but most of the loss is from water, not fat. Ketogenic diets and rapid weight loss are not recommended because of their dangerous side effects.

**Q: Are vegetarian diets recommended for weight loss?**

**A:** Not necessarily, although many people find it easier to lose weight on a mostly vegetarian diet that is high in fiber. Fiber-rich foods fill you up while contributing relatively few calories. Animal products tend to be higher in fat. Although some studies indicate that vegetarians do weigh less than persons who eat traditional diets, reducing diets should be based on familiar and well-liked foods to establish good eating habits that can be followed throughout life.

**Q: Is it true that hunger is not a problem if a good, well-balanced reducing diet is provided?**

**A:** No. At first, hunger may be a problem even on a well-balanced diet. As time goes on, hunger seems to lessen. Regular exercise often helps to regulate the appetite.

**Q: How much weight should I expect to lose per week if I diet properly?**

**A:** A weight loss of 1/2 to 1 pound a week is safe and effective. If you lose weight slowly, you are more likely to keep the weight off.

**Q: Is weight loss easy?**

**A:** No. Anyone who has ever been on a reducing diet knows that weight loss is a difficult task. It takes motivation, determination, and self-control over one's eating

behaviors, and it also requires support from family and friends.

**Q: Should all fat be avoided in reducing diets?**

**A:** No. It is virtually impossible to eliminate all sources of fat from the diet. Some fat, such as the type found in seafood, is actually needed for good health. Fat also is necessary for the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, and K), it furnishes essential fatty acids, and it provides flavor, variety, and satiety to the diet. However, because fat is the most concentrated source of calories, it should be restricted to no more than 30 percent of total calories.

**Q: How often should you weigh yourself when losing weight?**

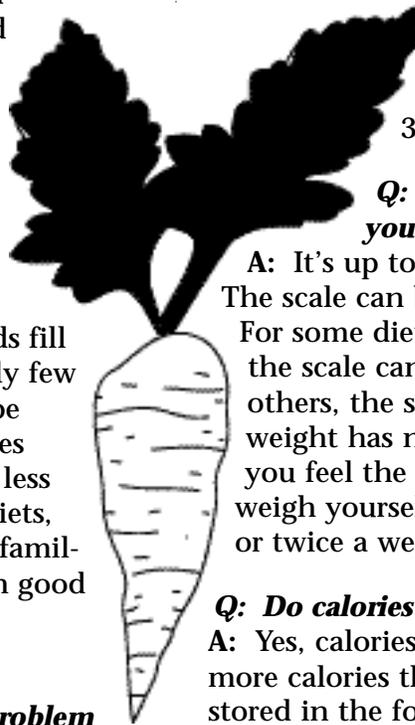
**A:** It's up to each individual to decide. The scale can be a powerful friend or foe. For some dieters, positive feedback from the scale can be a nice incentive. But for others, the scale can be a real enemy if weight has not changed or has gone up. If you feel the scale is motivating you, weigh yourself every day. Otherwise, once or twice a week is enough.

**Q: Do calories really count?**

**A:** Yes, calories do count. When you eat more calories than you burn up, the excess is stored in the form of fat. Each gram of protein and carbohydrate has 4 calories; each gram of fat contains 9 calories. (One gram is the weight of a small paper clip.) Regardless of what you may have heard, the only proven way to lose weight is to regularly eat fewer calories than your body uses. You can do this by reducing energy intake (food), by increasing energy output (physical activity), or preferably by doing both. A pound of stored fat contains about 3,500 calories. To lose 1 pound of fat a week, you must cut back 500 calories a day, burn up those 500 calories by increasing physical activity, or adopt a combination of both strategies.

**Q: What is a calorie?**

**A:** A calorie is a measure of energy. Scientists define the calorie as the amount of energy re-



quired to raise the temperature of 1 gram of water by 1°C. In the laboratory, the caloric content of food is measured in 1,000 calorie units called kilocalories. But in everyday usage this term has been shortened to “calorie” when the amount of energy in food is described. So the 80-calorie apple you eat for a snack is really 80 kilocalories.

**Q: What is the basal metabolic rate?**

**A:** The basal metabolic rate, also called basal metabolism, is the amount of calories the body needs to maintain its vital functions. It is the energy that allows the heart to beat, the lungs to breathe, the kidneys to cleanse the blood, the brain to think, and so forth. We burn up calories all the time through basal metabolism, even while sleeping. People with a low basal metabolism can be heavy even though they do not eat excessively.

## Foods

**Q: Are potatoes and other starchy foods fattening?**

**A:** No. Contrary to popular belief, starchy foods like potatoes, bread, and pasta are not fattening. It's the added butter, sour cream, and sauces that turn these foods into high-calorie items. French fries are much higher in calories than a baked potato.

**Q: Does the body need carbohydrates?**

**A:** Yes. Carbohydrates, through the process of digestion, absorption, and metabolism, furnish the body with energy in the form of glucose, or blood sugar. Body and brain cells need this energy source to survive and function correctly. If glucose is not available from carbohydrates, the body makes it available—with difficulty—from protein. This can happen when a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet is eaten.

**Q: Are there fewer calories in margarine than in butter?**

**A:** No. Regular margarine and butter have the same number of calories. They are both 80 percent fat and provide 34 calories per teaspoon. However, diet margarine contains more water and therefore has fewer calories than regular margarine and butter. Margarine also has less saturated fat than butter, an advantage for people trying to lower their blood cholesterol level. Margarine packaged in tubs and made from canola oil is a healthy choice.

**Q: Which has more calories: sugar or starch?**

**A:** Because they are both carbohydrates, sugar and starch have the same number of calories per given weight. Each has 4 calories per gram.

**Q: Do grapefruit, lemons, and vinegar really help dissolve fat?**

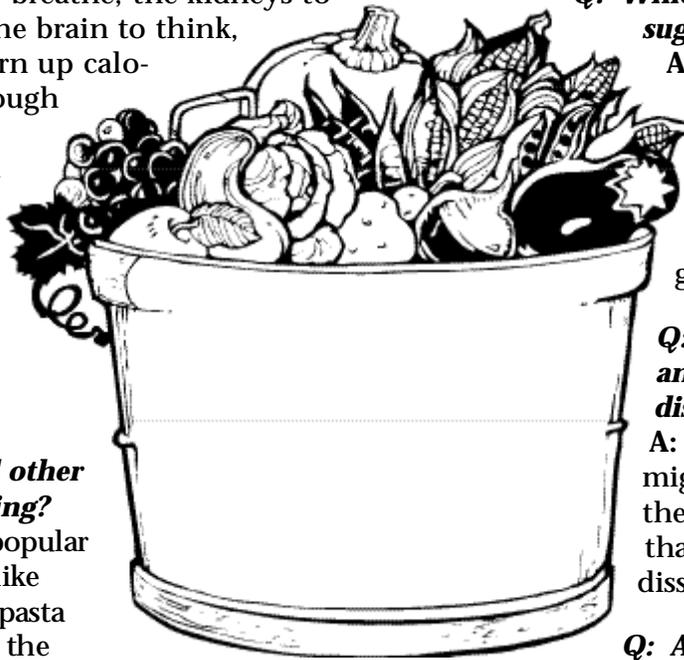
**A:** No. Despite what you might have read or heard, there are no “magic” foods that cause fat to melt or dissolve.

**Q: Are there certain foods that must be completely avoided while on a reducing diet?**

**A:** There are no specific foods that must be completely eliminated. A successful diet depends on the total number of calories consumed over time. After nutritionally balanced meals are planned according to the Food Guide Pyramid, additional calories can come from any food as long as you stay within your diet's total allowance. However, fats, sweets, and alcohol should be limited, because they contribute few nutrients with their calories.

**Q: Do I need to avoid meat and poultry when on a reducing diet?**

**A:** No, but the method of preparation is important. Avoid breading and frying with a



lot of oil, trim fat and remove the skin from poultry, and choose lean cuts of meat.

**Q: Should foods for weight control be purchased in health food stores?**

**A:** Not necessarily, because you can get almost everything you need at the supermarket. Foods bought in specialty stores are generally more expensive, and some “dietetic” foods are not really lower in calories. Be sure to read the labels. Supermarkets have plenty of healthy, low-calorie foods, such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and breads.

**Q: Should honey be used in reducing diets in place of sugar?**

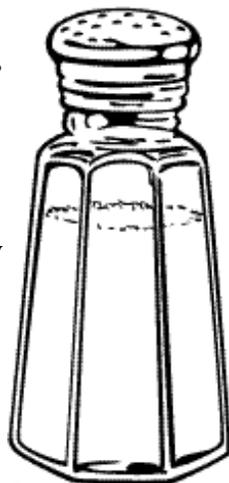
**A:** It is not necessary. One tablespoon of honey provides 64 calories, whereas 1 tablespoon of sugar provides 46 calories. Honey and brown sugar can contribute desirable flavors, but they have no special weight-loss or health properties.

**Q: Will it help to use low-fat products when on a reducing diet?**

**A:** It may help, but low-fat foods can still be high in calories if they have a high carbohydrate or protein content, so it is important to check the calories per serving on nutrition labels. Many people overindulge on low-fat foods because they falsely assume that “low fat” means “low calorie.” Some low-fat foods contain so much sugar that they are relatively high in calories.

**Q: Should salt be restricted when trying to lose weight?**

**A:** It is not necessary, but many Americans eat more salt than they need and probably should lower their salt intake, especially if they have high blood pressure. Salt (sodium chloride) is contained naturally in foods and is often an ingredient in processed foods. Many people add more salt during cooking and at the table. Because salt has been linked to high blood pressure in some people, the National Research Council suggests that



one’s daily salt intake from all sources should be limited to 6 grams, about 1 level teaspoon.

**Q: Does eating one meal per day or skipping meals promote weight loss?**

**A:** No. On the contrary, research suggests that these practices might promote weight gain. Skipping meals tends to cause overeating later in the day. It is better to plan your eating around three or more small meals a day, including snacks, and spread your calorie allowance over the entire day. Eating breakfast is especially important because it increases the body’s basal metabolic rate, helping to burn calories during the morning.

## Health

**Q: Can fat people still be healthy?**

**A:** This is controversial. Most experts agree that obesity is unhealthy, because it increases the risk of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and some cancers. However, perhaps because of genetics, some obese people, especially those who also exercise regularly, seem to be in good health.

**Q: Should expectant mothers who are obese lose weight?**

**A:** No. Pregnancy is not a time to lose weight, even when the expectant mother is obese. Research suggests that weight should be lost before or after pregnancy.

**Q: Is the body’s resistance to infection lowered by dieting?**

**A:** Not if weight loss is the result of sensible dieting. However, many fad diets can lead to nutritional deficiencies, especially if they are followed for a prolonged time. This can lower resistance to infections.

**Q: How fast can weight be lost safely?**

**A:** An average of 1/2 to 1 pound of weight loss per week is generally considered safe for most people. Faster weight reduction may indicate water loss, which is undesirable. However, weight usually is not lost evenly, with more lost some weeks and less others.

**Q: Is the so-called “roller coaster” or “yo-yo” syndrome of weight loss and gain risky?**

**A:** At one time this was considered to be undesirable because with each cycle, it seemed to become more difficult to lose weight and easier to gain it back. Although new research has disproven this notion, “yo-yo” dieting can cause the dieter to become discouraged and give up trying to reduce.

**Q: Why are some people heavy even without eating too much?**

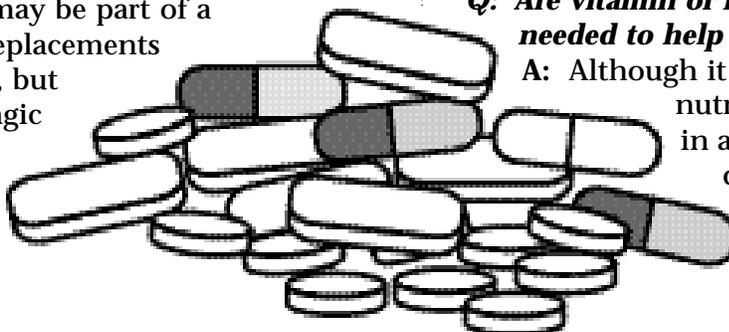
**A:** Despite years of research, obesity is still something of a mystery and our understanding of how and why it develops is incomplete. Although our caloric intake and exercise levels are important, heredity also plays a role. Research suggests that certain people have low basal metabolic rates, meaning they burn relatively few calories to maintain bodily functions. In other words, they conserve calories very efficiently and therefore tend to easily gain weight. Scientists think that these people can still lose weight by increasing their physical activity together with cutting down on calories.

**Q: Why do most people develop middle-age spread?**

**A:** During aging, the basal metabolic rate slows, so there is a tendency to gain weight even if one does not substantially increase caloric intake. Furthermore, many people become more sedentary as they age, and don’t adjust their eating habits to compensate for less activity. The key to preventing middle-age spread is to eat the proper number of calories and to continue exercising throughout life.

**Q: Are foods made from olestra and other fat substitutes recommended for losing weight?**

**A:** These foods may be part of a healthy diet as replacements for high-fat food, but they are not “magic foods” and consumers should not rely on them to lose weight.



**Q: Is the order in which I eat foods important in controlling weight?**

**A:** No. Despite some claims made in best-selling diet books, the order in which foods are eaten, or how foods are combined, has nothing to do with weight control.

**Q: Are artificial sweeteners safe to use?**

**A:** They appear to be safe for most people. Although saccharin has been used as a sugar substitute since the early 1900s, it has been under a cloud of suspicion since 1979, when research linked it to an increased risk of bladder cancer in laboratory animals. Aspartame (NutraSweet™) was approved in 1981 and is not recommended for people with a genetic disease called phenylketonuria, although others have claimed to be sensitive to it. Foods containing saccharin or aspartame must carry warning labels. Acesulfame K (Sunette™) has been used since 1988, and the artificial sweetener sucralose (Splenda™) was approved in 1998. If future research on sugar substitutes raises new safety concerns, it will be reported in the media. Unfortunately, misinformation about artificial sweeteners abounds, creating unnecessary panic and worry.

**Q: Is there a tendency to gain weight after you stop smoking?**

**A:** Yes. For some people, smoking seems to curb the appetite. However, the risks of smoking are far greater than the risks of being overweight.



## Dietary Supplements

**Q: Are vitamin or mineral supplements needed to help me lose weight?**

**A:** Although it is possible to get all the nutrients needed from food in a well-balanced reducing diet, it becomes difficult to do so when the caloric intake is less than 800 to 1,000 calo-

ries per day. Therefore, some experts recommend a multivitamin and mineral supplement that does not exceed 100 percent of the U.S. Percent Daily Value (%DV). However, there is no scientific evidence that taking large amounts of nutrients will help one to lose weight. Self-medication with megadoses of dietary supplements is potentially unhealthy and a waste of money.

**Q: Are laxatives useful in reducing programs?**

**A:** They have no value in reducing diets and may actually be harmful by causing dehydration and upsetting the body's mineral balance.

**Q: Are fiber pills a good source of dietary fiber?**

**A:** No. Fiber should come from food, not from pills.

**Q: Do products that contain chromium picolinate or herbal extracts help with weight loss?**

**A:** There is no credible evidence to support these claims. Consumers need to be aware that dietary supplements, including vitamins, minerals, herbals, and botanicals, are loosely regulated by the government. Unlike prescription drugs, supplements do not need to be rigorously tested for safety or efficacy, and manufacturers are allowed to make ambiguous and misleading claims for products. "Let the buyer beware" is truly appropriate when considering use of supplements.

**Q: Is acupuncture effective for weight loss?**

**A:** Acupuncture and other forms of "complementary and alternative medicine" such as yoga, meditation, and certain unconventional dietary practices are

being investigated extensively to determine their effectiveness for various health problems. Future research may indicate that some of these practices are helpful for controlling weight, but it is premature to make recommendations at this time.

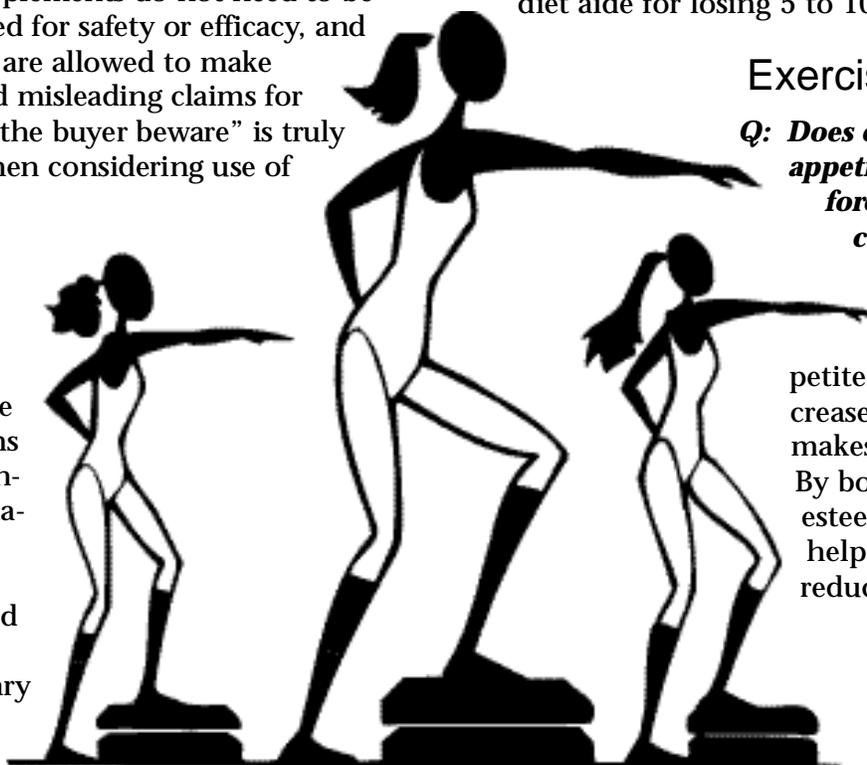
**Q: Are diet pills safe?**

**A:** Although diet pills are believed to be safe at the time they are approved or prescribed, several have subsequently been found to be risky or dangerous. The popular weight loss drugs fenfluramine and dexfenfluramine have been linked to serious heart problems. Other drugs, such as phentermine (nicknamed "fen-phen" when used in combination with fenfluramine), can produce side effects similar to amphetamine stimulants. Health professionals caution that appetite-suppressant diet pills should only be considered when large weight loss is needed for health reasons, and the benefits of the drugs probably outweigh the risk of extreme obesity. Furthermore, diet pills should be closely and actively monitored by a qualified physician. The development of new weight loss drugs is an active area of research, but all drugs, including diet pills, have side effects. These are serious drugs for serious problems, and should never be used frivolously or as a diet aide for losing 5 to 10 pounds.

## Exercise

**Q: Does exercise increase appetite and, therefore, make calorie control harder?**

**A:** Moderate exercise seems to reduce appetite rather than increase it. Exercise also makes you feel better. By boosting self-esteem, exercise can help people stick to a reducing diet.



**Q: Is exercise safe for obese people?**

**A:** Everyone should try to get regular exercise.

Unless there is a medical reason against it, moderate exercise will help obese people burn up some of their stored calories.

Obese people who are not used to exercising should start

slowly and build up gradually. Stretching and muscle strengthening exercises, walking, and swimming are beneficial activities for almost everyone.

**Q: Can you lose weight by exercising and not going on a reducing diet?**

**A:** Yes, but it will be a slower process than if you adopted a good reducing diet with it.

**Q: If you do not exercise, does muscle turn into fat?**

**A:** No. Muscle decreases in size when it is not used. As people age, it may appear that muscle is turning into fat. What is really happening is that muscles are shrinking in size, and fat stores are increasing. This process can be slowed by continuing to exercise and eating healthfully throughout life.

**Q: Are saunas or massages effective for losing weight?**

**A:** No. You might temporarily lose weight in a sauna from water that is lost through perspiration, and a massage can help you relax and feel good, but neither rid you of fat deposits. Do not be fooled by clothes, body wraps, or devices that are advertised to help you lose weight. Most are worthless and some might be dangerous.



**Obesity** is a complex condition

that involves social, cultural, environmental, and biological factors. Although experts do not agree on the best way to manage obesity, they believe that if your weight is not in the healthy range, you should try to reduce your health risks through better eating and exercise habits. Try to control your weight by eating moderate amounts of foods that are nutritious, affordable, and enjoyable, and by doing physical activities that you enjoy. If you are sedentary, try to become more active, and if you are already very active, try to continue the same level of activity as you age. More physical activity is better than less, and any is better than none.

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### **Weight Control: Questions and Answers**

by

**Mark A. Kantor**

**Extension Food and Nutrition Specialist  
Department of Nutrition and Food Science  
University of Maryland, College Park**

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