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Ask the Dietitian: January 2013

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"How can I tell if a new diet is just a fad?"

The New Year brings in the usual rush of weight loss commercials, advertisements, claims, promises and products. Most of these "diets" are unbalanced, extreme or completely nonsensical.

For example, a fad diet may claim that a specific food will change your body chemistry, making it easier or harder to lose weight. Another diet may promise three, five, or even seven pounds of weight loss in a week. Another may promise weight loss with the injection of certain hormones or vitamins.

Unfortunately, the diet industry knows that many Americans are desperate to lose weight and are willing to try most anything to reach their goal.

As a dietitian, there is nothing more discouraging than seeing a patient disheartened by a failed "diet." The reality is that most of these "diets" do not work; not because the patient has not tried hard enough, but because the diet is based on false medical advice.

If you have fallen for one of these fads, make one of this year's resolutions to make sure your attempts to lose weight in 2013 are safe, effective and sustainable.

In the world of dieting claims and advertisements, there is not much new under the sun. Every few years, the same sort of "new breakthrough diet technology" makes the headlines with a slightly different twist.

For example, the acai berry was popular in 2008 as a super food promising to recharge your metabolism.

In 2012, a popular television doctor endorsed raspberry ketones as, "a fat burner in a bottle."

Neither of these extracts have been found to produce weight loss in humans. So how do you wade through all the headlines to discern the real from the fake?

According to WebMD, the following are characteristics of a fad diet:

- Recommendations that promise a quick fix
- Dire warnings of dangers from a single product or regimen
- Claims that sound too good to be true
- Simplistic conclusions drawn from a complex study

- Recommendations based on a single study or testimonials
- Dramatic statements that are refuted by reputable scientific organizations
- Recommendations made to help sell a product
- Recommendations based on studies published without review by other researchers
- Recommendations from studies that ignore differences among individuals or groups
- Eliminating one or more of the five food groups

Wondering what characteristics are found in an effective weight-loss program?

- Encourages long-term lifestyle changes, to include recommendations for diet and activity
- Discourages regular consumption of processed foods and eating out
- Sets goals of three-eight pounds of weight loss over a month
- Focuses on improved health parameters and not just weight loss
- Suggests the development of a support team or attendance in a support group
- Emphasizes permanence of lifestyle changes and discourages quick-fix mentality
- Provides method of self-monitoring, such as food log or diet tracking phone application

If you approach your 2013 dieting decisions with these characteristics in mind, you will easily be able to differentiate between a fad, quick-fix diet and a tested weight-loss program.

(Editor's Note: Ask the Dietitian is a monthly column. Have a question? Email mary.staudter@us.army.mil.)

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