



SHOULD I FOLLOW A “FREE-FROM” DIET?





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It was Einstein who famously said “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler,” but sometimes this thinking doesn’t transfer that well to the health and fitness industries, where the over-simplification of, sometimes, complex issues is rife.

When faced with a problem, such as how to lose weight, nutrition can often be reduced to a soundbite, but is that always a good idea?

The result of simplifying nutrition to this extent is a diet that doesn’t allow certain foods to be eaten. Sometimes entire food groups are banned. Many ways of eating, from paleo, gluten-free, to low carb take this approach, but while the diet might be easy to follow in principle, it may pose problems. Here’s why diets which are “free-from” certain foods can backfire in the long run.

Gluten-Free

Gluten-free diets, whilst essential for those with coeliac disease, have often been used as a tool to improve healthy eating. Indeed, in America, while only 1% of people suffer from a gluten allergy ⁽¹⁾, 25% of the population currently eat a gluten-free diet ⁽²⁾. Not only is the diet thought to improve health, since the book “Wheat Belly” was released, gluten-free diets have also been touted as a weight-loss tool. However, despite popular opinion, the science behind gluten-free diets tells a different story.

A study from 2000 ⁽³⁾ took a group of people with coeliac disease and looked at what happened to their body composition after they started a gluten-free diet.

- The people in the study had their weight and body fat percentage measured at the start and again after one year of a gluten-free diet
- People who stayed on the gluten-free diet significantly gained body fat after one year

Another study ⁽⁴⁾ showed that out of people who stuck to a gluten-free diet for two years, 81% of them had gained weight.

While this may seem confusing, it's easily explained. From data released last year ⁽⁵⁾, it is clear that as well as containing lower amounts of vitamin B-12, folate, niacin, vitamin D, iron, zinc, magnesium, calcium, dietary fibre, and protein; gluten-free foods simply contain more calories.



Carbohydrate Free

One of the most popular “free-from” diets is a low, or even no-carb diet. Not eating carbohydrates is certainly simple in theory, and if people ate a lot of high-calorie snack food previously, it can result in weight loss. The problem is that while it’s easy on paper, giving up carbs completely is a lot harder in real life.



A recent review paper looked at the efficacy of low carb diets to help manage type 2 diabetes ⁽⁶⁾. Some of the findings were pretty interesting. Out of the six studies that prescribed diets with fewer than 50g of carbohydrate, only one of them managed to hit that target. Instead, the average carbohydrate consumption across the studies was 106g. It’s worth pointing out these studies were on the management of type 2 diabetes, not just people trying to lose weight where you’d expect the motivation to be rather less than managing a life-changing disease.

Another review paper drew similar conclusions ⁽⁷⁾. When one study prescribed a carbohydrate amount of 20-50g. After 12 months, the subjects ended up eating an average of 190g and most people could not stick to the allotted carb amounts when they were under 50g. Despite how easy people on social media say it is to stick to the diet, it seems real-world results are different.

Animal Product Free

Being vegan is currently very much on-trend. But despite the ethical reasons for doing so, the current fashion is that the diet is healthier than eating any animal products, and a quick look at the data would certainly seem like that is the case.

- Shunning animal products is linked with an overall less chance of getting cancer ⁽⁸⁾.
- Vegans have the lowest BMIs when compared to meat-eaters and dairy eating vegetarians ⁽⁹⁾.

So, it's a win-win for veganism right? Well, not quite. The problem with this research, that you won't hear about on social media, is that it doesn't prove anything.

The reason for this is that compared to a great number of non-vegans who drink, smoke, live sedentary lives, and have questionable diets, new vegans are like an advert for wellness. In short, they are health-seeking; and it's this that makes them lighter, fitter, and less likely to drop dead than other people. While they might think their health is all down to a rigid diet, it's a combination of a variety of different factors.

A study by Key ⁽¹⁰⁾ recruited people by standing outside of health food shops, or by putting adverts in healthy lifestyle magazines. The study included meat-eaters as well as vegetarians and set out to find if there was a difference between each group's weight or how likely they were to get specific diseases. Because both groups of people had similar lifestyles and health-seeking behaviours, there was no difference in their preponderance for health risks or being overweight despite the difference in diet choices.



"Dirty" Foods Free

The notion of "clean" eating, whilst currently popular, has been around for decades. Clean eating categorises foods as "clean" or "dirty". The idea is that by sticking to clean foods, you optimise health and body composition, whereas by eating dirty foods you leave yourself open to weight gain and poor health. One issue is that while we might intuitively think we know what constitutes clean or dirty food, no official consensus exists. That said, the main point of clean eating is to promote health and to lose weight, but are either of these claims true?

Firstly, while eating only clean foods over less nutritious, "dirty" seems like it should result in consuming more vitamins and minerals, but this isn't the case. Eating varied foods instead of following a strict, "clean", meal plan still results in similar micronutrition ⁽¹¹⁾.

In terms of weight loss, leaving out "dirty" foods can also backfire.

- One study put two groups of women on similar weight loss diets ⁽¹²⁾.
- While both groups reduced calories, one group was allowed to eat whatever foods they wanted, whereas the other had to leave out the bread.
- At the end of the study, the group that wasn't allowed to eat bread lost less weight and had significantly more instances of non compliance, and more than three times the dropout rate.

While eating high calorie or junk foods all of the time might not be the best way to lose weight or maintain health, the above study points to the fact that having the choice to eat them if you want leads to better results.

Modern Foods Free

The paleo diet states that “modern” foods largely consumed since the agricultural revolution, such as grains like wheat, and foods with modern processing lead to weight gain and health problems. The idea is that by eating foods from the Palaeolithic era you avoid these pitfalls.

The paleo diet can certainly work for weight loss. Due to its lack of processed foods, this way of eating can be more filling than other diets. Indeed, the paleo diet was seen to be more satiating than a Mediterranean diet in one study ⁽¹³⁾. Although the people in the study were not counting calories, it was estimated that the paleo group consumed 434 fewer kcal than the Mediterranean group.

However, when paleo is compared to another diet and calories are more tightly controlled, the results aren’t so different.

- When paleo or Mediterranean diets are compared over 12 weeks in a study both diets resulted in the same amount of weight loss ⁽¹⁴⁾.
- In a study by Mellberg, 70 women around 60 years of age were given either a paleo or Nordic Nutritional Recommendations diet. After 24 months, the results were the same ⁽¹⁵⁾.

As we know from the discussion of clean vs dirty foods, leaving foods or whole food groups out completely doesn’t increase the number of vitamins and minerals you consume, and makes sticking to the diet harder. Where the paleo diet is concerned, there are no long-term benefits to leaving out modern foods for health or weight loss when compared to other healthy diets.

Diets that ban certain foods are a simple way to sell nutrition but eliminating certain food groups can cause more harm than good. If you want a good relationship with your health and body, you might want to try a more balanced approach.

A diet that isn’t “free-from” anything but practises moderation overall is, likely, the best option.

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