

# How to choose a diet program

BY SUSAN BURKE MARCH, RD, LD/N, MS, CDE

Dieting is an extremely personal activity, and the one-size-fits-all approach rarely produces successful results. To help health seekers choose the best diet program to meet their unique needs. The following are tips on how to select a plan based on individual lifestyle and food preferences, also citing imperative program components:

**1. Food Preferences:** Choose a program that features the foods you enjoy. If you feel deprived, you will not stick with it over the long haul. It is all about modification. If you love cereal and grains, a low carb approach is not the best way to get started on your weight loss program. Portion control is the secret to weight loss and maintenance.

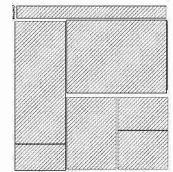
**2. Adequate Calories:** Most women need a minimum of 1300-1400 calories – and men approximately 1600 – just to cover basic metabolic functions, and more when you incorporate more activity and muscle building exercises. Avoid very low calorie diets as, although you may experience quick weight loss, experts say that the quicker you lose it, the quicker you put it back on. Slow, gradual weight reduction – about one to two pounds a week – is more likely to be permanent.

**3. Fads:** Avoid programs that require eating certain foods with other foods, such as, “Only eat fruit after meals, never with protein,” or other such unscientific recommendations. Very low carb diets produce quick and dramatic weight loss, but are not intended to be sustained over the long term. If you choose a “branded” diet, be sure to follow the instructions and not set your own rules.

**4. Meal Patterns and Mealtimes:** How do you like to eat? Respect your personal preferences, and your internal clock. Some people do fine with the traditional three meals daily, but I find that eating smaller meals more frequently helps dieters maintain energy and avoid the highs that follow big meals and lows from too many hours in between. A good strategy is to take something from each meal to eat a couple of hours later, such as a cup of non-fat yogurt or a turkey rollup (a slice of turkey breast rolled up with tomato and lettuce).

**5. Preparation:** Dieting is hard enough. Do not choose a recipe-based plan if you do not have time to cook. The right plan suits your lifestyle. Meal replacements are ideal for portion control, and many successful weight maintainers use them consistently. Use quick cereals, individual portions of yogurt, and frozen entrees – they are balanced and nutritious and do not require too much planning or prep.

**6. Balanced Nutrition:** Choose a program that includes a variety of foods so you do not become bored and lose your motivation to continue. High fiber vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, and healthy, monounsaturated fat (from olive oil and fatty fish) are the ingredients of a healthy diet that you can maintain permanently.



**7. Budget:** An important consideration, because some plans are very economical and others are more expensive to maintain. The most flexible and frugal is the recipe-type plan. Learn all you can about nutrition and replace any item in your menu with one that is on sale. Economize by purchasing large-sized portions of fish, vegetables, chicken, or fruit. Pre-portioned prepared foods are more expensive, but for some, it's worth the price to enjoy the convenience and portion control.

**8. Support:** Support helps keep you on track and motivates you to reach your weight goal. Commit to meeting with an expert, a coach, a group, or a friend – especially at the beginning of your behavioral change. Support may be face-to-face, or sign up for a free or fee-based online program. It is best to commit to a scheduled meeting time or, better yet, a program that lasts at least 12 weeks with a continuing maintenance program. A face-to-face consultation with a registered dietitian who will stay in touch by phone or email is the best game plan.

**9. Maintenance:** Once you are at your goal, it is ideal to stay with the program you used for a year, modifying it to add variety so you may fully adopt your new healthy behaviors. The best program transitions to a maintenance program once you reach your weight goal.

#### **Diet Program Components Should Include:**

**Self Monitoring:** The act of writing down or logging your diet, activities and thoughts about your progress helps you stay aware – and pinpoint any areas where you may be having difficulties to plan for change. You can share your logs with your diet coach, either face-to-face or online. Learn about calories in food and how your activities burn calories by logging on to a web-based program.

**Cognitive Restructuring:** Dump “negative self-talk” – instead of striving for “skinny” or a certain number on the scale, strive for following the program, and improving your weight and fitness. Replace with positive affirmations, such as “I will walk every day for 30 minutes and stretch afterwards” or “when I go out to eat, I’ll order grilled, baked or broiled, and not fried food.” Abandon the “all or nothing” attitude that gets in the way of healthy lifestyles.

**Stimulus Control:** So, do you find yourself in front of the vending machine when you get hungry in the afternoon? Bring that healthy snack with you, and put the change in a jar on your desk where you can see it fill up, evidence of your new behaviors. Do you put off exercise until after work, but never seem to get to it? Schedule activity earlier in the day, and log it.

**Stress Management and Problem Solving:** You dread going to that barbeque – you always overeat. What really works is to plan in advance what you’re going to eat – have a healthy snack before you go; be prepared to stay fueled over that long workday keeps you motivated. Controlling stress can help control weight, especially when overeating is used to assuage a stressful situation.

**Physical Activity:** It is important to start slowly, and enjoy your activities – that’s what is going to keep you on track to permanent weight control. Choose activities you enjoy! “Exercise” means doing any-thing that gets your

heart rate up – including dancing, or biking or just walking – briskly.

**Relapse Prevention:** Have strategies in place to prevent weight gain – if you regain a few pounds, then returning to a structured menu and increasing your activities.

*Susan Burke March, RD, LD/N, MS, CDE is a registered and licensed dietitian and certified diabetes educator who has influenced the dietary health and well being of consumers worldwide, due in large part to her multi-year and faceted tenure with eHealth leader eDiets.com. March is the author of Making Weight Control Second Nature: Living Thin Naturally, eDiets Pocket Guide of Dieting & Weight Loss, eDiets Dining Out Guide and a contributing author for the eDiets Weight Loss Solutions magazine and more than 400 nutrition and diet-related articles that have appeared in leading media outlets worldwide.*



**Susan Burke March is the author of *Making Weight Control Second Nature: Living Thin Naturally*.**