

Information Overload

Whether you're surfing the Web or watching TV, the glut of weight-loss news can overwhelm you. Here's how to make sense of the headlines.

BY JOAN RAYMOND

Remember when meat was good, then bad, then good again? Being a little fat was OK—as long as you exercised. Milk was wholesome, at least until dieters realized that the fat content could lead to weight gain; then studies linked dairy to weight loss. A funny thing has happened on the way to the information age: Dieters have gotten slammed. We're being treated to 24-7 coverage of the latest science on diet, health, and nutrition—and navigating that information has become a full-time job for anyone interested in these subjects. "People aren't better informed; they're just more confused because nothing is put in perspective," says Keith Ayoob, Ed.D., associate clinical professor, Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. What follows is a sampling of some of the latest dueling headlines, along with advice to help you sort through the confusion.

Vegetarians Stay Slimmer

VS. MEAT FILLS YOU UP, PREVENTS OVEREATING

If you want to keep your weight down, stop eating meat. If you want to lose weight, eat lean protein. There's science to back up both claims: A British study, published in the *International Journal of Obesity*, followed 22,000 people—meat eaters, vegetarians, and vegans—for 5 years. While every group gained some weight, meat eaters who switched to a vegetarian diet during the course of the study gained the least. On the other hand, another recent study found that people lost weight most successfully when 30 percent of their daily calories came from protein, probably because protein increases satiety.

THE GREAT MEAT DEBATE

So should you stock up on steak or on carrots? Both, says Barbara Rolls, Ph.D., Guthrie Chair of Nutritional Sciences, Penn State University, and author of *The Volumetrics Eating Plan*

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(Morrow Cookbooks, 2005). “Balance is essential to long-term weight loss.” If you don’t eat enough protein, you’ll miss out on the satiety it offers, but if you eat too much protein, especially from animal products, you’ll ingest too many calories. Eating too much meat may also mean not getting enough fruits and vegetables—which are key for dieters due to their high water and fiber content.

BOTTOM LINE A healthy diet, with plenty of foods from a *variety* of food groups—including fruits, vegetables, and lean protein—is the best plan for stopping pounds from creeping up in the long run.

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**FAT OK IF
YOU'RE FIT**

VS. Slim and Sedentary
Better Than Fat
and Active

One bright spot in the diet wars was the belief that a few extra pounds were OK as long as you exercised regularly. The initial fit-and-fat buzz came from a study by the Dallas-based Cooper Clinic: Researchers found that death rates for men who were very active were lower than those for men who were sedentary, regardless of body mass index (BMI). This finding led many people to conclude that it didn’t matter what you weighed as long as you exercised regularly.

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CAN YOU BE FIT AND FAT?

Unfortunately, that was the wrong conclusion to draw, as it's rarely possible to be both overweight and in good health, explains Gail Woodward-Lopez, M.P.H., R.D., associate director, Center for Weight and Health, University of California at Berkeley. In fact, a study from Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, involving some 27,000 women found that *both* low levels of physical activity and high body weight were independently linked to an increased risk of heart attack and stroke. However, being overweight but fit was found to be riskier than being thin and unfit.

BOTTOM LINE Both maintaining a healthy weight *and* staying active are crucial. Aim for moderate exercise (swimming, walking, or cycling) for at least 30 minutes at least three times a week.

STUDYING THE STUDIES

Here's how to evaluate the latest diet and health research with a more critical eye:

- If you hear that results were gleaned from the first trial of its kind, be wary. Findings must be replicated before they are widely accepted.
- Give credence to randomized, controlled double-blind studies. In those, subjects are randomly assigned to groups without knowing until the study ends who

gets the treatment and who gets a placebo.

- The larger the sample size, the better.
- Pay attention to the age and health status of subjects to see whether the results might apply to you—or not.
- Most widely accepted research is published in accredited, peer-reviewed journals, such as *The New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*.

SLIM DOWN WITH MILK

VS. Dairy Makes You Gain Weight

Talk about dueling studies: On one side is the National Dairy Council. The research it touts says that a milk mustache will help you shed pounds. On the other side are many members of the scientific community who believe the science is suspect.

DOES IT DO A BODY GOOD?

True, there is significant research, published in major medical journals, showing that three daily servings of milk, cheese, and/or yogurt incorporated into a reduced-calorie weight-loss plan can jump-start your metabolism and help burn fat. One study, published in *The Journal of Nutrition*, showed that low-fat dairy boosts the body's ability to break down fat more efficiently. In contrast, a larger study, published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, found no significant correlation between dairy and weight loss. In fact, many of the men who increased their dairy intake gained weight due to dairy's high fat content.

BOTTOM LINE Dairy may or may not do your waistline good, but it's definitely a good source of protein, calcium, and vitamin B12. That's why the American Dietetic Association (ADA) and the American Heart Association recommend dairy consumption for overall health—but not necessarily for weight loss, says ADA spokesperson Cynthia Sass, M.A., M.P.H., R.D. Aim for at least two servings of low-fat dairy each day (teens and women over age 50 should have three servings daily). ■