

# HEALTH MYTHS. BUSTED



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**M**ost of us want to feel good about ourselves. We really want to be healthy. But when it comes to health and dieting we hear so many conflicting dos and don'ts that it becomes nearly impossible to know what's right. Which facts about dieting are credible? Which ones are borderline myths? And which are downright nonsense? To help clarify this important subject, we spoke to some professionals in the field. Here are just a few obscurities clarified, complications simplified, and health myths busted.



## 1. EATING FAT MAKES YOU FAT



Sure, feast all day on junk food like fried chicken and potato chips, and you're bound to see it on your waistline. The body has a hard time digesting these kinds of fats, which is why they tend to sit where we don't want them to. But it's important to differentiate between unhealthy fats, trans fat (manmade junk), and healthier fats, like coconut, olive, or almond oil.

"The body is a brilliant biomechanical engineer," says holistic nutritionist, Malka Stern. "It knows how to use the fat it consumes." Healthy fats are important for balancing hormones, curbing cravings (which, of course, lead to weight gain), and nourishing brain cells. "In fact, my clients who cut out all natural fats, such as milk fat, from their diets, ended up losing less weight, not more," admits Malka. "Low-fat diets, diets where the food had the natural fats trimmed away, can lead to lack of satiation, hunger pangs, and cravings."

So, instead of waging an all-out war on innocent fats, try cutting back on some of the less-healthy fats like canola oil, and the manufactured junk like margarine and shortening, and replacing them with healthier fat options, like coconut oil or olive oil.

## 2. EATING CARBS IS BAD FOR YOU

Are eating carbs really as bad as the champions of the zero-carb diet industry tell us? It's not so simple. Most will admit that high-carb diets are not for the health conscientious. "Carbs made from sifted white flour, especially, are harder to digest, cause sugar spikes, and puts your insulin (the hormone that balances sugar levels in the blood) on overdrive. This can result in headaches, hormonal imbalances, and weight gain," says health coach Faigy Fink.

But to *drastically* cut back on carbs while assuming you won't be the worse for wear? The carbohydrate food group is actually one of three sources of nutrients and energy necessary for human survival. "Our carbs are our first aid," says Malka. According to the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, a center for nutritional advice for teens, diets that are too low in carbs can be dangerous.

"The trending zero-carb diets can only offer short-term results," says Faigy. "Cutting down too much on carbs can cause cravings, which leads to binge eating — something we want to avoid most." Most importantly, moderation and variety are the keys to a balanced diet and healthy lifestyle.

Can we find a happy medium between indulging in carbs and cutting them out entirely? If carbs are your go-to food, cut out some of the white-flour carbs and junk carbs like cake and cookies, and try replacing them with more easily digestible carbs such as starchy fruits and vegetables (like butternut squash and sweet potato), and whole-grain carbs. "For some, trimming the carbs on your plate, while increasing intake of healthy fats (like avocado) and protein can help curb your appetite and stimulate weight loss," says Faigy.

### 3. CHEMICAL SWEETENERS ARE THE WAY TO GO

Is Splenda the magic bullet for satisfying our sweet tooth without putting on pounds? Sugar overload is undoubtedly unhealthy and can lead to headaches, weight gain, and diabetes, while with chemical sweeteners, you get the taste without the calories. But, chemical sweeteners have their own downsides. “This is one of the most debated topics in the industry,” says Faigy.

Artificial sweeteners are made from chemicals, and Malka puts it simply: “Your body is designed to digest real food, not chemicals.” It’s really no wonder, then, that recent studies have discovered that sweeteners are harmful, with short- and long-term effects ranging from headaches to increased risk of cancer. What’s more, a recent issue of *Time* quoted links between sweeteners and heart disease, diabetes — and weight gain. Other studies suggest that eating artificial sweeteners not only produces the same physical response as sugar, but also doesn’t satisfy our sweet cravings like sugar does, and consequently induces cravings for more sweets.

So, stick with the chemicals, overindulge on the sugar, or get used to bland-tasting breakfast cereal? “You can learn to satisfy your natural inclination for sweets with healthier alternatives, like fruits and naturally sweet vegetables,” says Faigy. Other healthier alternatives for satisfying your sweet tooth include cinnamon, organic maple syrup, agave syrup, honey, coconut sugar, silan, date syrup, and coconut milk. Organic Stevia, a newer product on the market, is a natural sweetener derived from the Stevia plant and is 300 times sweeter than sugar. Today, it’s assumed safe when consumed in moderation. You can combine any of these alternatives with a little sugar to reduce your overall intake.

### 4. GO GLUTEN-FREE?

Today, foods with labels touting gluten-free line the store shelves. But is the gluten-free trend much more than just hype? In truth, some studies do suggest that gluten creates an inflammatory response that some don’t tolerate well. “For a very small number of people — those who are gluten intolerant or sensitive — going off gluten is a lifesaver,” admits Malka.

But, should we go gluten free just to shed the pounds? “The gluten-free diet is another victim of the ‘fad-diet society’ and is not necessarily based on the body’s needs,” says Malka.

“If your body doesn’t react negatively to gluten, going off it may actually wind up being to your detriment,” adds Faigy. Lots of those foods with gluten-free labels contain even more sugar and junk added just to make up for the taste naturally found in gluten-containing foods. “Just look at the ingredient list on a box of Cocoa Pebbles,” says Faigy. It’s also harder to pack in all the nutrients you need when maintaining a gluten-free diet. “If you want to go off gluten-containing foods,” says Malka, “which *healthy* foods will you substitute for them?”

Problems such as eczema, stomachaches, and headaches could be a sign of gluten or wheat intolerance. “Many who are experiencing symptoms of sensitivity might solve their problems by going off wheat alone,” Malka suggests. But, if you’re experiencing no such symptoms, you’ll probably do your body a bigger favor by becoming more health-conscious than by simply scouting out gluten-free labels.

As with many other life choices, the key is what our goal is. Whether you choose to reduce your gluten intake or not, stay in touch with your end goal. Is it to up your quality of life or just lose weight? Ask yourself: “Why am I doing this?” suggests Malka.

### 5. EAT AWAY... JUST EXERCISE!

True or false: You can pile up as many jelly doughnuts as you want as long as you get a good workout afterward to burn off the calories. Answer: False. It turns out, not all calories are created equal. “Chicken has way more calories than a pack of Gushers, but the sugar in the Gushers will be stubborn and sit on you while the chicken will get more easily digested and leave the body easily,” says Faigy. “Considering the metabolic impact of food and how easily it’s digested is super important. Highly processed foods, for example, are overwhelming for the body and hard to digest — and to get rid of in terms of body fat.”

“It’s okay to treat yourself and to exercise,” says Malka. “Both treating yourself once in a while and exercising is normal, but putting them together can create a very unhealthy attitude. It’s good to exercise, but constantly exercising to burn off extra calories can create a vicious, unhealthy cycle. Trust your body to be able to handle treats once in a while, and respect your body by engaging in enjoyable exercises and activities. This attitude will automatically help you be in tune with your body and its natural ability to support us.”

### 5. SHAKES MAKE GREAT SUBSTITUTES

Today, the shakes that line the store shelves promise everything from hunger satisfaction to weight loss to nutrient boosts. Are they the best thing since sliced bread? Or tools of a multi-billion-dollar diet industry?

“Healthy shakes *can* be great substitutes for snacks and on-the-go breakfasts,” agrees Faigy. “You can use yogurt, milk, or coconut milk base, and even add nutrient-packed veggies, like spinach and cucumbers.”

Malka agrees. “I think that shakes can make a fun substitute meal — once in a while.” But, of course, what’s inside them is important. “If you want satisfaction from a shake, just make sure to put in all the nutrients you’d get in a well-balanced meal, including protein and a healthy fat, like almond butter or peanut butter.”

But can we assume that the blender is the all-in-one solution for feeling great and losing weight? The shakes we see in the stores are products motivated by sales, not necessarily your health. “They often contain processed ingredients that are hard to digest,” says Faigy. Before grabbing a shake off the store shelf, be sure to check those ingredients.

“While shakes can make substitutes for snacks and quick breakfasts, personally, I’m not so into shakes as substitutes for regular meals,” says Faigy. “A shake doesn’t offer the same level of nutrition; even a protein powder can’t replace a piece of chicken or a slice of fish.”

“I think it’s very difficult to feel truly satisfied when our diet consists solely of cold, blended food,” says Malka. “There’s something about eating a warm meal, about experimenting with different textures and temperatures as we chew our food, that gives us the real nourishment and satisfaction we need from our diets.”

### 6. IF A DIET WORKED FOR MY FRIEND...

If my friend went on an awesome diet that worked wonders for her, it will offer the same benefits for me, right? Not necessarily.

There is no one-size-fits-all diet, and what works for your friend may not do the same for you. “Diets are very bio-individual,” says Faigy. “One person’s food can be another person’s poison. If you do find that you’re struggling with your weight or your health, it might help to see a professional in the field who can customize a diet plan that suits your individual needs and lifestyle.”

“We can easily get sucked into the diet fads without even considering whether it’s good for us on a personal level,” says Malka. “Instead of listening to what every advertisement is telling you, learn to listen a little better to what your body is telling you — and trust it. We’re so used to working counterintuitively. Your body is not against you, it’s your friend!”

### WONDERING IF YOU'RE EATING HEALTHY?

According to the American Institute for Cancer Research, our diets should include plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and beans.

These foods provide fewer calories but they’re full of fiber and water, helping us feel fuller for a longer time. And don’t forget about the many nutrients, vitamins, and minerals that our bodies need, and that these foods provide.

So, how healthy is your diet? Try this quiz to find out!

**Choose the answer that most closely represents what you actually do; no use stretching the truth when it comes to health :)**

#### 1. Breakfast for me is usually:

- a. Egg-white omelet
- b. muffin and orange juice
- c. A bowl of oatmeal or cereal with fresh fruit

#### 2. Concerning the amount of meat in your diet, do you:

- a. Always include a large amount of red or processed meat with your meals
- b. Have a medium-sized portion of red or processed meat five or more times week
- c. Usually fill at least two thirds or more of your plate with plant foods and one third or less with lean meat

#### 3. Think about the meals and snacks you’ve eaten over the past week. How many types of plant foods (vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and beans) have you included?

- a. Fewer than 10 different kinds
- b. Between 10 and 20 different kinds
- c. More than 20 different types of these foods

#### 4. You eat takeout or fast food:

- a. Almost every day
- b. A few times a week
- c. Occasionally as a treat

#### 5. The number of portions of fruit and vegetables you have on an average day is:

- a. One or less
- b. Between two and four

Now score yourself using answer key below. If you chose the first answer, give yourself 1 point; for the second answer, 2 points; and the third answer, 3 points. If your score was:

**5 POINTS OR LESS:** It’s time to make some healthy changes! Adding more whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and beans can help protect you from a variety of health problems like cancer and heart disease.

**6–11 POINTS:** You’re doing well! But there’s still room for some improvement. Think about how some of your food choices could be healthier. Can you grab a healthy sandwich or fresh fruit instead of a sugary snack? Or choose an extra portion of steamed vegetables instead of red meat?

**12–15 POINTS:** Yay! You are making the right food choices and helping your body perform at its best! Keep it up and you’ll continue eating your way to a healthier life.

*This quiz was adapted from the American Institute for Cancer Research’s Healthy Diet Quiz*

#### MEET THE PANELISTS

**Faigy Fink** is an Integrative Nutrition Health coach, with 15 years’ experience in weight loss, maintenance coaching, eradicating emotional eating, and menu planning customized to the individual. She specializes in making diet a healthy lifestyle approach with balanced eating habits, along with guidance and techniques to maximize and energize your exercise routines. Faigy can be reached through Mishpacha.

**Malka Stern** has professional accreditation in both conventional and alternative modalities of Holistic Nutrition. Her passion is empowering children, teens, and adults to become their own nutritionist, with wisdom, joy, and love. She meets clients in Jerusalem and Beit Shemesh, as well as over the phone. She can be contacted via Mishpacha.