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Intermittent fasting? Keto? Paleo? Be careful about the diet you follow

Many adopt diet plans without considering whether they are sustainable. Some diets can even be potentially harmful. Don't follow fads.

Mary Chong

Every so often, we hear about diet trends from social media and our peers. From vegetarianism to intermittent fasting, keto diets and their variants, these diet trends are often advocated by celebrities or influencers, making them difficult to ignore or even resist. No wonder we are left in a dilemma on whether to follow these trends, and if so, which diets to adopt.

But are you tempted to follow these diets only because of the fear of missing out? While many of them offer promising opportunities to lose weight, improve health and even promote environmental sustainability, should the decision to embark on a particular diet be taken lightly?

Drawing from my experience as a clinical dietitian, from my current research in the area of diet and nutrition and from personal encounters, here are some pointers you may want to consider.

FASTING FOR WEIGHT LOSS

One popular diet trend is intermittent fasting, which is not exactly a diet in the conventional sense but more of an eating pattern that cycles between periods of fasting and eating, and focuses on when one should eat foods, rather than what foods one should eat. There are various approaches to intermittent fasting, including alternate-day fasting, 5:2 fasting (eat normal for five days a week and fast for two days) and 16/8 fasting (eat only within an eight-hour window

each day), of which 16/8 appears to be the most popular.

Conceptually, by eating fewer meals, intermittent fasting should lead to an automatic reduction in calorie intake and subsequently lead to weight loss, as long as one does not overstuff oneself during the eating periods. As is the case with any type of weight loss, blood sugar levels, blood pressure and cholesterol levels should also improve.

Intermittent fasting works for some because it provides an easy structure to limit calorie consumption, and it makes eating simpler – fewer meals to prepare, cook and clean up after! A student of mine says intermittent fasting worked for her because she prefers to go “cold turkey” to achieve her short-term weight loss before going back to regular eating, rather than the traditional gradual weight loss route, which takes longer.

Current human studies in intermittent fasting reveal conflicting findings, with some studies demonstrating health benefits while others do not. To

date, there is no scientific proof that intermittent fasting is any more effective than a traditional low-calorie diet or whether it can be sustained for long-term weight loss.

But one thing is clear. Intermittent fasting isn't for everyone.

People who are not used to skipping meals or not eating for an extended period of time may be assailed by hunger and fatigue, especially when they start out on this diet. Some people may also struggle with other side effects like insomnia, irritability, headaches, nausea and gastric problems.

A colleague once proudly declared that he was on intermittent fasting when I noticed his slimmer waistline, only for me to find him ballooning back three months later.

“What happened?” I asked. “Err... the diet did not say anything about the types of foods I am not supposed to eat, so I sort of cheated and went for whatever food I fancied and probably ate

too much during the two meals I ate each day... hard to resist lah,” he replied sheepishly.

Indeed, even though this diet plan is intended to restrict calories, one can easily overeat (or even binge) during the eating period because of increased hunger, which can eventually lead to weight gain if that happens repeatedly.

More importantly, intermittent fasting is certainly not recommended for those having issues with fertility, are trying to conceive, are pregnant or are breastfeeding. People with medical conditions or on medication should also consult their doctors before trying intermittent fasting.

DANGERS OF UNSUPERVISED DIETING

Another diet trend in vogue is the ketogenic diet (or keto diet in short), one of many versions of low-carb diets. By drastically reducing carbohydrate and replacing it with higher amounts of fat and moderate amounts of protein, one's body goes into a metabolic state called ketosis and becomes very efficient at burning fat for energy. The keto diet is popular because of the fat and weight losses it induces and the satiating effect it gives due to the high-fat and high protein content of the diet.

However, self-administered keto diets have been reported to be accompanied by “keto flu”, a temporary cluster of symptoms that includes headache, fatigue, nausea, “brain fog” and gastrointestinal discomfort, among others. Other serious medical conditions such as liver inflammation and deranged levels of blood parameters can ensue if very restrictive keto diets are followed.

Adhering to a ketogenic diet long term has also been cautioned against as the effects can be severe, ranging from nutrient deficiencies, an increased risk of kidney stones and osteoporosis, increased blood levels of uric acid (a risk factor for gout), anaemia and other problems over time.

Another popular low-carb diet is the Paleo diet. It advocates the intakes of “natural foods” such as fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds, lean meat and fish, but the avoidance of “farmed foods” such as grains, legumes, dairy products and processed foods. While seemingly healthy, the main concern about Paleo diets is the lack of whole grains, legumes and dairy, which are important sources of fibre, vitamins, calcium and other recommended nutrients.

In general, low-carb diets are not sustainable for many individuals. While they may help some people who have found it hard to lose weight using other methods, they should ideally be followed only under the supervision of a physician and

dietitian. Otherwise, one may end up with nutritional deficiencies and health complications.

And while diets are generally discussed in the context of our physical health and body image, it is easy to overlook that they can affect us emotionally, too. Food is also a social connector.

Many find it challenging to stick with certain diet regimens while keeping up with work, family and social obligations. The restrictions imposed by certain diets can also lead to irritability and mood swings, potentially straining relationships with family and friends. The struggle to adhere to a diet plan can also affect one's mental health.

NOT FOR KIDS, ADOLESCENTS

I hear from my students that an increasing number of adolescents (some still in secondary school) are trying out such diets, perhaps impressed by high-profile celebrities or influencers touting their benefits. Misinformation on social media also plays a part, and can put the health of adolescents and children at risk. Such diets can also lead to eating disorders among the young, as they reinforce distorted self-image or compulsive eating.

Until more evidence is available, children and adolescents should stay away from such diet trends. They need more nutrition than adults as their bodies grow and develop. Cutting down on calorie intake through such diets can impair their physical growth and cognitive development.

A DIET SHOULD BE SUSTAINABLE

There are many strategies to improve one's diet and health, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Importantly, not everyone needs to follow a diet trend. If you do want to adopt such diets, be sure to do it safely by doing thorough background research, learning from your past experience with food and carefully considering how the diet may affect you.

The best diet for you is the one that works for you and which you can stick to in the long run. For most people, adopting a regular, healthy balanced diet by following the Health Promotion Board's My Healthy Plate would produce adequate health benefits and weight reduction.

At the end of the day, you know your body best. Listen to it, and do not just give in to peer pressure and blindly follow the trends. Unlike shopping, there is no return policy with our bodies. We have only one body to last our lifetime, so treat it with care. Not too much (food), not too little, just the right amount for you.

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