

What Is the Best Diet?

Can we define “diet,” please?

The term “diet” has been converted into a pop culture catchphrase. It’s something that you “go on” to lose weight, a short-term (non-) “solution.” But “diet” comes from the Latin for (we’re translating loosely here) “lifestyle,” or daily food intake; it’s not a way to eat to lose weight as fast as possible (and gain it back even faster.) It’s how you eat for life. It’s a thing you do to remain healthy. So you want a good diet, permanently. You don’t want a two-week “diet.” And there’s almost nothing more important to say about the word than that.

Where do diets come from?

Diets are ways of living that groups of people practice for generations. That’s fundamentally different from the notion of a renegade genius who says: “I came up with a new way to eat, and I’m going to sell it to the world even though there’s no long-term proof of benefit or even safety.”

So the cabbage soup diet, the grapefruit diet, the Hollywood cookie diet . . . ?

Perfect, ridiculous examples — yes. There are no populations of people who live on cabbage soup only, so it’s preposterous!

I mean, every other day there’s a new diet craze promoting weight loss, mental clarity, radiant skin — basically near human perfection. How can people make these claims? Is there actual evidence?

There is lots of evidence, and the weight of it tells a clear,

consistent story. But there are also many opinions competing for attention, opinions that — intentionally or not — sow confusion.

Science was never designed to work well with news cycles; there isn't a punch line every twenty minutes. Science is cumulative, incremental, developing over months, years, decades, centuries. It takes time to approach truth and understanding.

Trying to shape scientific discovery into short news cycles for the sake of views, clicks, book sales — whatever — turns it into a pretzel; it leads nowhere. There really *isn't* confusion when science is used right; there's pseudo-confusion when it's used badly.

Science is a tool, and any tool can be used well or badly; a hammer is great for nails, and just as horrible for screws. Science is a power tool, for populating gaps in our understanding. But used badly, it can mangle understanding instead.

Bottom line: There *is* evidence of the impact of diet on human health — good, clear evidence, indisputable and mostly uncontroversial. We know what a good diet is. We know how to practice it.

Then why do so many diets—like the Whole30 diet or ketogenic diet—literally ask us to eat in an imbalanced, highly limited way?

Those are not diets for life; they're ostensibly short-term weight loss diets, though even that's arguable. Beyond that, they're simply not good choices: Balance is good, imbalance is bad. Really. Period.

A lot of things not consistent with balance or health can lead to rapid weight loss in the short term — a bout of flu, for instance, or for that matter, cholera! Gimmicky weight loss diets substitute severe restrictions for long-term health-

ful eating. They work for quick weight loss, but they're not sustainable.

Balance, on the other hand, is a high-level principle that pertains across all considerations of diet and nutrients. **In an ideal world, all ultraprocessed foods would be eliminated.** For example, you need sodium to live; you just don't need as much of it as modern, highly processed diets deliver.

But aren't some nutrients, like saturated fat, just evil, to be avoided at all costs? In some cases, isn't elimination more important than balance?

In an ideal world, all ultraprocessed foods would be eliminated, because food would actually once again be . . . food. In that world, there would be many, many fewer bad choices to make. If we're talking about naturally occurring nutrients, though, things like saturated fat are not intrinsically "bad." Nutrients like saturated fat or sodium are only "bad" because modern diets provide too much of them relative to other sources of nourishment. That's imbalance. Some saturated fat is found in even the most ideal diets; and sodium is an essential nutrient. As Paracelsus, the father of toxicology, famously said: The dose makes the poison.

Is there a "diet" that leaves all the others in the dust?

It would be truer to say that we know *eating patterns* that beat out other diets — but as soon as we move in that sensible, defensible direction, all the pixie dust drops out of the equation; it doesn't sound like magic. Sadly, most people are convinced they want pixie dust, no matter how many times false promises about its magical powers have let them down, and no matter how simple good eating is shown to be. Whenever we're comparing contemporary diets, from intermittent fasting to

Whole30, there are commercial interests attached. But *the simple truth is that all “good” diets share the same principles*. They’re variations on a theme.

What’s the theme?

The best diets have this in common: They focus on foods that are close to nature, minimally processed, and plant predominant — what we call a whole-food, plant-predominant diet. Everything else is detail.

How do we know that plant-predominant diets are the healthiest?

What we *don’t* have is a single randomized trial, beginning before birth, lasting a lifetime, enrolling tens of thousands — to show once and for all “what diet is best.” What we do have is a mountain of evidence, built a bit at a time, supporting the theme of wholesome foods, mostly plants, in balanced, sensible assemblies.

We can’t say what “diet” is best. We *can* say what eating patterns are best. And that’s it: real foods, close to natural form, mostly plants, augmented a little bit by almost whatever else you like. It’s that simple, as hard as that might be to hear.