



*Diets decoded:*  
WHAT  
WORKS,  
WHAT  
DOESN'T

From coconut oil to butter coffee: are the latest headline-grabbing diet and nutritional fixes the weight loss answers we've been waiting for, or just another craze? Don't worry - we're here to help you sort the facts from the fiction.

CHECKED FOR  
ACCURACY BY

**Good Housekeeping**  
HEALTH  
WATCH

## HIGH FAT

**A** new raft of books claim that eating fat can actually make you thinner. Zana Morris' book *The High Fat Diet* says you can lose up to 10lb in 2 weeks eating butter, cream, nuts, avocado and cream cheese. The idea is that keeping insulin levels low by avoiding carbs encourages the body to use fat instead - a state scientists call ketosis.

*What we like:* Fat is digested slowly, leaving you more satisfied for longer after meals. The diet plans are healthier than the original Atkins options, as they include unsaturated fats such as oily fish, avocados and nuts as well as saturated fats like butter and cream.



Can high-fat foods help slimmers?

*The pitfalls:* Rigid high fat diets may be hard to stick with for good. They exclude many nutrient-rich foods like beans, lentils, milk, fruit and certain nuts and seeds, so you could miss out on soluble fibre, vitamin C and antioxidant nutrients. No long term studies have been done, so it is unknown if the weight stays off. Although the latest research suggests saturated fat may not be as bad for the heart as once thought, how much is safe is still unclear.

*The bottom line:* They may work for some people in the short term, but any diet that eliminates a major food group (in this case carbohydrates) is hard to sustain. As the long term health effects are unknown, our verdict is that it would be safer to stick to a moderate fat intake.

## SUGAR FREE

**I**n the last two years, sugar has become public enemy number one, with a flood of diets and cookbooks telling us to cut the white stuff out of our lives. Eliminating sugar, they say, will help you lose weight, improve your health and feel more energetic.

*What we like:* Cutting sugar by avoiding processed foods is a good way to slash calories and drop pounds. It's relatively easy in terms of label reading, as you only need to focus on one ingredient (sugar). Since sugar-free diets are as much about habit-breaking as healthy eating, they'll teach you how to make positive changes to the way you eat, and to re-think your shopping, cooking and eating habits, all of which should help to keep the weight off.

*The pitfalls:* Some of the advice is extreme (such as avoiding fruit) and the idea of quitting sugar completely is unnecessary and impractical for many people. Studies show that sugar in moderation is not harmful to health. Suggestions that sugar is toxic and addictive are based on studies with animals, not humans, that used extremely high doses (equivalent to 17 cans of coke). Bizarrely, some of the recipes in sugar-free diet books include sugar in the form of honey, maple syrup and rice malt syrup, which scientists say are no different as far as the body is concerned.

*The bottom line:* The underlying message to cut down on sugar is sound, but there's no need to obsess over the occasional dollop of ketchup or scoop of ice cream. Stick to the World Health Organisation's recommended daily maximum of 50g of added sugar.

## COCONUT OIL

**P**opular as a cooking ingredient, advocates say that using it instead of your usual oil can help you lose weight, boost your metabolism and lower cholesterol levels, ward off heart disease, and even prevent Alzheimer's.

*What we like:* The fatty acids in coconut oil are shorter and more water soluble than those in other oils, so they are directly routed to the liver, where they're readily burned for fuel. This means they're less likely to be deposited in fat stores. Coconut oil also contains high levels of lauric acid, which boosts 'good' HDL cholesterol.

Choose coconut oil for taste - not weight loss

*The pitfalls:* There is no scientific evidence to show that coconut oil helps people lose weight. The claims are based on studies with MCT oil, which contains a different blend of fatty acids. While coconut oil may raise levels of HDL cholesterol, it also increases artery-clogging LDL cholesterol, as it is loaded with saturated fat (90% vs. 64% in butter). This means its overall effect on heart health is not known.

*The bottom line:* A tablespoon contains 99 calories, so you'd still need to cut your overall intake to lose weight. The British Heart Foundation do not recommend it. Occasional use is fine, but it's not the miracle food supporters claim.



## THE ALKALINE DIET

It isn't new, but interest has been revived by several recent diet books, promising weight loss as well as relief from bloating, indigestion and tiredness. The alkaline diet stems from the belief that modern foods cause the body to produce too much acid, and that we should replace these 'acid-forming' options (meat, dairy products, sugar) with alkaline foods (fruit, veg, nuts, beans and lentils).

**What we like:** The diet is reasonably healthy, as it includes lots of fresh fruit, veg, grains and nuts, which ties in with official guidance on a healthy diet. The avoidance of alcohol, sugar and processed food means that you'll cut calories.

**The pitfalls:** The idea behind the alkaline diet - that you need to neutralise acid in your body by eating alkaline foods - is not based on credible science. Studies show that what you eat does not affect the body's acid-alkaline balance. Cutting out so-called acid-forming food groups like dairy products, meat and fish could make it difficult to meet your protein and calcium requirements.

**The bottom line:** The alkaline diet may help you lose weight because it cuts processed foods and encourages lots of plant-based alternatives. These foods are filling, so you automatically eat fewer calories - but this has nothing to do with it being acidic or alkaline!

According to this diet, tomatoes are the good guys



## BIRCH WATER

A popular health tonic in the Baltic countries for centuries, birch water is now set to become the new drink du jour in the UK. Made from sap collected from the trunk of silver birch trees, manufacturers claim it contains natural sugars, vitamins and minerals, as well as compounds called saponins, which are said to have cholesterol-reducing properties. The health benefits range from simple hydration to

flushing out toxins, eliminating cellulite and treating problems such as flu, headaches, dandruff and eczema, and urinary tract problems.

**What we like:** It is lower in sugar than most soft drinks (about 6g per 100ml) and a good source of potassium.

**The pitfalls:** There is no independent research backing up manufacturers'

nutritional or health claims. The saponins in birch water may help lower cholesterol, but levels may be too low to be of significant benefit. These claims have not been approved by the European Food Safety Authority.

**Verdict:** Birch water is a good source of natural hydration, but don't drink it for its health benefits, as they have not been scientifically proven.

The alkaline diet encourages fresh fruit and veg, but limits other important foods



## HIGH-PROTEIN DRINKS

No longer reserved for bodybuilders, protein drinks are becoming increasingly popular with dieters. This year, they were added to the typical basket of goods used to calculate the cost of living. Designed as snacks rather than meal replacements, this new generation of drinks claims to aid your weight loss efforts by keeping you full longer. They are made from milk (e.g. USlim and For Goodness Shakes) or whey protein, which is found in milk (e.g. Upbeat).

**What we like:** The drinks provide 15 - 20g protein per serving (about one third of a woman's daily needs), which studies show helps promote satiety (the feeling of fullness after eating) more than carbs or fat. Protein can help lower levels of the hunger stimulating hormone ghrelin, which may help you control your appetite and eat less throughout the day.

**The pitfalls:** You can get the same appetite-lowering benefits from food.

A glass of milk, a pot of yogurt, a handful of nuts or seeds, or a slice of cheese will also help keep you full between meals.

**The bottom line:** Protein drinks alone don't cause weight loss, so you still need to eat fewer calories overall, but they may help you feel less hungry. Replacing a high carb snack with a protein shake could make a diet plan easier to stick to.

Protein may help you feel less hungry



## BULLETPROOF COFFEE

Also known as butter coffee, this is a double espresso blended into a thick froth, with two tablespoons each of butter and MCT oil (a mixture of coconut and palm kernel oils). It's meant to be drunk as a breakfast substitute, and is rapidly gaining ground in the UK. Advocates claim that a morning dose programmes your body to burn fat for the day, promotes weight loss, curbs your hunger, improves your focus, and leaves you feeling full until lunchtime. The idea behind the brew is that if you're not eating carbohydrate for breakfast, your body will use fat as fuel instead.

**What we like:** The addition of butter and oil slows the absorption of caffeine, which means you get a more prolonged energy hit with less of the jittery side effects.

**The pitfalls:** At more than 400 calories and 47g of fat (mostly saturated) per cup, it's hardly a dieter's dream. Despite its popularity, there are no studies supporting its weight loss claims. To promote fat-burning ketosis, you would have to restrict carbs at all your meals not just for breakfast. And you'll only lose weight if you eat fewer calories than you burn.

**The bottom line:** Starting your day this way means taking in a massive amount of fat in one go, and missing out on all the other good stuff your breakfast could provide you with.

Fewer jitters but no weight loss?



## GENE-BASED WEIGHT LOSS



Good Housekeeping's nutritionist Anita Bean tests out the latest DNA answer to dieting...

These tests look at genes linked to weight management and exercise. They comprise a saliva swab that you do at home and post back. It is claimed that gene variations reveal your risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, carbohydrate and saturated fat sensitivity, and lactose and gluten intolerance risk, and therefore what type of diet and exercise programme suits you best. The idea is that one person may be genetically predisposed to losing weight through a low carbohydrate diet, while another suits a Mediterranean diet or a low fat diet.

### DOES IT WORK?

I tried the DNAFit Diet test (from £99) which looks at 13 genes, including those affecting sensitivity to carbs and saturated fat, and one indicating your risk of type 2 diabetes. Another shows how much of the hunger-stimulating hormone ghrelin you make. I received a diet plan and a personalised report revealing my genetic potential for weight loss, based on my body's response to carbohydrate and saturated fat. It also covered:

- ◆ Predisposition to coeliac disease (low)
- ◆ Risk of lactose intolerance (low)
- ◆ Caffeine, salt and alcohol sensitivity (all low)

The test more or less confirmed what I already suspected - that I don't gain weight particularly easily, and can consume gluten, milk, caffeine, salt and alcohol without problems. I turned out to have a 'medium' sensitivity to carbs and saturated fat, which means I should eat 'moderate' (as opposed to 'low' or 'high') amounts of these nutrients, i.e. a Mediterranean diet, to avoid weight gain, which I already do. I also got a 12 week diet plan, with Mediterranean-style recipes.

### ANITA'S VIEW:

The idea of tailoring your diet and exercise programme to your DNA sounds seductive, but the tests are expensive and it is unclear how valid or useful the results really are. The science behind genetic testing is not yet fully developed, so we don't have enough robust clinical evidence to say with certainty that this is the best way to find out what diet will suit you. □