

Fat chance! Weight loss myths BUSTED

Faced by an onslaught of fad diets and unqualified advice on losing weight, it can be hard to sort the facts from the hype. Step forward *Anita Bean* to help dispel 11 of the most prevalent myths



'Sugar is the devil'

1 The main gripe with sugar is that it makes our food and drink taste good, which makes us want to consume more and more. However, there isn't clear-cut evidence that sugar itself is fattening, addictive or toxic.

"No food is essentially 'evil' — it's all about context and how much we consume, how often," registered nutritionist Charlotte Stirling-Reed says. "Sugar is unlikely to be a problem unless it's over-consumed."

Cyclists have less need to worry about sugar than do sedentary folk. Studies have shown that regular exercise blunts the negative

effects of sugar (or, more specifically, fructose), preventing the rise in blood fats that normally occurs after eating lots of sugar. This isn't a licence to tuck into extra doughnuts; you still need to keep a check on calories and stay within sensible limits. The government suggests a maximum five per cent of our daily energy intake from added sugars, which works out at 37g or nine teaspoons for a cyclist consuming 3,000kcal a day.

SWAP IT: When you need a sugar fix (e.g. on a long hard ride), opt for real food sources (e.g. Medjool dates, bananas, raisins, and fruit-and-nut bars) instead of gels and energy bars.

'Going gluten-free is healthier'

2 About one in 100 people have coeliac disease, an autoimmune disease that sees the body trigger an attack on the intestines when gluten is eaten. For such people, a gluten-free diet is essential. For the rest of us, there's no strong evidence a gluten-free diet is beneficial.

"Although the gluten-free diet often gets sold as a weight loss aid, there's no science to support the idea that avoiding gluten will result in a reduction in body fat as a natural consequence of avoiding bread, pasta and other gluten-containing foods. If there is weight loss, it's down to a calorie deficit," explains registered dietitian Laura Tilt.

The main problem with eliminating gluten if you don't have to is that you may miss out on important nutrients found in whole grains. According to a study published in the *British Medical Journal* in May 2017, this can put you at greater risk of cardiovascular disease. And, for cyclists, there's no performance advantage from cutting gluten. In one study, non-coeliac cyclists who cut gluten for seven days fared no better in a time trial than those who consumed gluten.

SWAP IT: If you're eating wheat (e.g. bread or pasta) for breakfast, lunch and dinner, try to add more variety with foods such as sweet potatoes, quinoa or whole grain rice.

'Eating clean is the best way to lose weight'

3 There's no clear definition of eating clean, but it loosely means eating natural foods and avoiding anything processed. While there's nothing wrong with eating more fruit and vegetables, what about cheese, olive oil or bread? — they're processed too, after all. The term 'clean eating' has become contentious and has angered many nutrition experts. "Eating clean implies that some foods are dirty," says registered nutritionist Clare Baseley. "It's not a healthy approach, as all foods can contribute to a balanced diet if eaten in moderation. Eating clean often

encourages the elimination of nutritious foods like grains or dairy, which are vital for fuelling exercise and keeping our bodies healthy."

The truth is, so-called clean eating imposes a set of arbitrary and unnecessarily strict eating rules, which, for some people, can be a slippery slope to rigid and obsessive behaviour around food. Studies have shown that having a more flexible approach to dieting is more likely to result in sustainable weight loss.

SWAP IT: No food should be off-limits — even cakes, biscuits and crisps every once in a while. Aim to eat a wide variety of foods in appropriate amounts.



'Low-carbohydrate high-fat diets (LCHF) help you lose weight faster'

4 To try to settle the debate as to whether LCHF or lower fat diets are more effective for weight loss, scientists carried out an analysis of 32 rigorously controlled studies that compared diets of equal calorie content but differing in carbohydrate and fat content. They found that both regimes produced very similar body fat loss, with lower fat diets having the slight edge.

"I find in practice cyclists lose weight if they cut down on calories, no matter where they come from," says Chris Cashin,

lecturer in sports nutrition at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. "But quite often the cyclists who follow LCHF diets also have low intakes of fibre, calcium and some B vitamins. They also tend to see a drop in their performance."

Sports dietitian Alex Cook agrees that LCHF diets can mean a "lowered ability to be active and burn calories", hampering weight loss goals.

SWAP IT: Try periodising your carbs. Do your low-intensity training sessions with low carbohydrate availability, such as first thing in the morning, and vice-versa.

'Fat makes you fat'

5 Fat may be more calorie-dense than other macronutrients, providing nine calories per gram, compared with four calories for protein and carbohydrate, but that doesn't mean eliminating it if you want to shed fat. "Eating a lot of high-fat foods may cause weight gain, not because it's fat, but because this is putting you into a caloric surplus, meaning you're eating more energy than you're using,"

explains performance nutritionist Danny Webber. Tom Brownlee, exercise physiologist at Liverpool John Moores University, adds: "There are good and bad fats. Some are essential to our health, so completely avoiding them is not a good idea." What's more, cutting fat can leave you hungry because fat is satiating, giving the body the feeling of being full. **SWAP IT:** Focus on healthy unsaturated fats in oily fish, avocados, olives, olive oil, nuts and seeds, and cut harmful hydrogenated fats in processed foods.

'Switching to coconut oil speeds weight loss'

6 Many of the weight-loss claims for coconut oil point to its high content of medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs). These fats have a shorter chain length than other fats and are water soluble, which means they are absorbed and metabolised more quickly. Theoretically, they have less opportunity to be deposited in fat stores. But claims about coconut oil speeding fat loss or boosting your metabolism are unfounded, as they are based on studies using MCT oil (which contains a different blend of fatty acids), not coconut oil. In any case, any metabolism-raising effect is likely to be very small.

"In studies on the effects

of coconut oil on weight, weight loss has only been seen in people who are also in calorie deficit," observes registered dietitian Helen West. "Simply adding coconut oil to your food won't help you burn more fat and, at 99 calories per tablespoon, could sabotage your weight loss efforts."

On the plus side, coconut oil is very heat-stable, so is good for frying, whereas polyunsaturated oils such as sunflower oil are far less stable and can soon begin to break down into potentially carcinogenic compounds at high temperatures.

SWAP IT: If you like the taste of coconut oil, go ahead and use it occasionally, but it must not be the sole fat source in your diet.



'Slashing calories on two days of the week is an effective way to lose weight'

7 In terms of weight loss, there's nothing magical to intermittent fasting diets like the 5:2. By restricting your eating time, you eat fewer calories, but there is little evidence that intermittent fasting is any more effective than other weight loss regimes. In a randomised clinical trial published in May, US researchers found that those who followed this regime lost the same amount of weight as those who cut back on calories every day. Over one year, both groups lost six per cent of their body weight, but there was no difference in adherence or cardiovascular risk.

"For cyclists, though, slashing calories on training days can interfere with your goals," warns registered nutritionist Claire Baseley. "It's hard to complete a high-intensity session on a fast day, and even the day after you'll likely feel sluggish and not at your best."

SWAP IT: If you decide to try 5:2, try to consume at least 50-70g of protein — equivalent to a small chicken breast (125g), 500ml milk and a 100g tin tuna — on your fast days, which will help you feel fuller longer, and reduce muscle loss.

'You need to weigh your food'

8 Most diet plans require you to weigh your food. In the short term, this can be a useful way of getting an idea of what a portion should look like. After all, most of us wouldn't know what a bowl of porridge oats weighs or how many potatoes count as a 'portion'. But regularly weighing your food has lots drawbacks. "It takes lots of effort, time and energy and you can easily get obsessed with weighing. Doing it for every meal is not

healthy nor practical in the long run. It can end up taking all the pleasure and enjoyment out of meal preparation and eating," says nutritionist Charlotte Stirling-Reed. **SWAP IT:** Using your hand can give a rough and ready guide to portion size and doesn't require any equipment. A portion of carbs or fruit should be the size of your fist; protein portions should be the size of your palm; non-starchy vegetables the size of your hand, and high-fat foods like cheese or nuts the size of your thumb.

'You need to ditch carbs to stay thin'

9 Sometimes people notice that cutting back on carbs works... for a short while. But they soon regain any lost weight once they begin eating carbs again. To maintain the weight loss you get from cutting carbs requires a permanent commitment. Many studies show that low-carb diets produce no greater weight loss in the long term. "Carbs aren't fattening. In fact, they are essential and are the body's

preferred fuel," explains Alex Cook. "The truth is, good quality, whole grain foods such as brown rice and wholemeal bread won't stop you losing weight. Eating the right amount of carbs individualised to your activity will ensure you can train to the max and get the most out of your performance." **SWAP IT:** Instead of cutting carbs, opt for healthier, high-fibre carbs such as chickpeas, lentils, black rice or freekeh, oats and sweet potato. It's quality over quantity.

'You can eat whatever you like provided you exercise'

10 When you exercise regularly, it's tempting to see a workout as a free pass to eat what you like. But those extra calories here and there can soon add up. "The simple truth of weight loss relates to calories in and calories out," explains Tom Brownlee. "If what you put into your body (food) exceeds what's going out (exercise and keeping your body alive), then you will

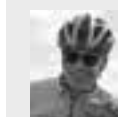
not be able to lose weight... It doesn't matter how frequently or hard you've trained." Unless you're blessed with a fast metabolism or an ability to self-regulate your appetite, you will need to keep a check on portion sizes and daily calories. **SWAP IT:** Logging your food intake and tracking calories with an app such as MyFitnessPal for a period may help keep you on track and make you more aware of what and how much you're eating.

'Certain types of carb are more fattening than other types'

11 All carbohydrates are equal in terms of calories, be they from rice or jelly babies. "All carbs ultimately end up as glucose in the bloodstream and this carries the same calorie value per gram no matter where it's come from," explains dietitian Laura Clark. It's actually quite hard for the body to convert carbs

into fat, de novo lipogenesis, which only happens when you are in positive energy balance and your glycogen stores are full. **SWAP IT:** Focus on unprocessed, nutrient-dense carbs such as whole grains, pulses, fruit and vegetables. These foods have a higher fibre content, digest slower and make you feel fuller longer than refined carbs, making overeating less likely.

'The secret to keeping weight off? There isn't one!'



Dom Irvine
49, lost 28kg —
and has kept it off.
He explains how:

I once weighed more than 100kg, but over the past decade I got down to and sustained around 82-84kg... but it's been flipping hard work!

I started with walks and runs, progressing to triathlons and after a number of years got into ultra-distance cycling, which I just love. At the age of 47, I broke the tandem Land's End to John o' Groats record with Charlie Mitchell — we completed the journey in 45 hours.

What I learned, and what none of the diets on offer tell you, is that weight loss is hard work and no fun. You are asking your body to consume itself by burning up fat

reserves as the source of energy rather than the food you eat.

Maintaining the ideal weight became sustainable once I realised that eating sensibly is not about dieting but about a way of life. It means consuming only the calories a day that I need.

Weighing myself daily and plotting it on a graph helped. Focus on the trend and not the day-to-day measurements. Count the calories in the food you eat and make sure your daily intake is less or equal to the energy you have expended. Remember, it is better to be the fat lad at the back of the peloton than the one on the couch.

Dom Irvine is a 'flambassador' for Fat Lad at the Back (fatladattheback.com).