

7 Ways to spot a FOOD FAD



It's almost impossible for American consumers to know what to eat anymore. We are bombarded daily with social media food trends, blog articles, bestselling books on weight loss, and recipes and products promising to give us more energy and healing than we've ever seen before. If you've ever experienced this barrage and subsequent confusion, you'll appreciate these seven queries that can help you make a return to real food.

1) Is the may-be-food-fad based on good science? Note: Blogs don't count for good science.

Here's an example of what I mean. A few years ago, a couple researchers, Susan Swithers, PhD, and Terry Davidson, PhD, studied the effects of diet

sodas on rats. They wanted to see if the consumption of diet soda had anything to do with weight gain. Their theory was that artificial sweeteners can cause weight gain by altering the body's ability to regulate calorie intake. At the conclusion of their study, they found that it was probably a true hypothesis, but it needed a lot more studying before they could say, definitively, that it was true.

What happened though, and what "stunned" the researchers, was how many bloggers and nutrition websites wrote subsequent articles saying that diet sodas most certainly cause weight gain, citing Swithers's and Davidson's study, which, as Dr. Swithers pointed out, "...really was a small study."

Doctor and researcher, Barry Popkin, PhD, whose own research on sugar-sweetened beverages has shown that they do cause weight gain, set out to find out if there was a correlation between artificial sweetened beverages as well, and, along with his colleague, "found little support for the notion that no-calorie sweeteners stimulate appetite or contribute to obesity in some other way."

Now, to be sure, nutrition excitable people like me (and probably you) really want this study to be true. I really want to be able to look my clients in the eye and say, "Without a doubt, drinking diet soda will cause you to gain weight." But the truth is, I can't. I can say, "Diet soda has been linked, in

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some small studies, to possible weight gain," but the truth is, until this theory has been studied in double-blind trials, (which, in some cases is impossible to do), we just don't know if it's true.

I use this example to illustrate the point that everything should be questioned. Think of the current popular diets out there, and by diets, I mean any new "programs" or ways of eating. Ok, did you think of a couple? Is there good science to back them up? Who created them? The two hot fad diets I can think of right now were created by knowledgeable people who have degrees in exercise physiology and/or are physical therapists. They've studied nutrition on their own a lot, and the truth is, there probably isn't any harm in trying these diets for a time. But keep in mind that there are no scientific trials on the diets themselves. There's no proof that they work. No research to back up the long term safety of the diets. That, and the fact that A LOT of people have latched on to these diets as the be-all end-all to their health and weight problems, despite any research to show that they actually work, is why you should be questioning them.

2) Would your Grandma have eaten this way? Could she have?

Michael Pollan, the famous nutrition journalist is famous for saying that you should eat how your Great-Great-Grandmother ate:

"Don't eat anything your great-great-great grandmother wouldn't recognize as food. Imagine how baffled your ancestors would be in a modern supermarket: the epoxy-like tubes of Go-Gurt, the preternaturally fresh Twinkies, the vaguely pharmaceutical Vitamin Water. Those aren't foods, quite; they're food products. History suggests you might want to wait a few decades or so before adding such novelties to your diet, the substitution of margarine for butter being the classic case in point. My mother used to predict "they" would eventually discover that butter was better for you. She was right: the trans-fatty margarine is killing us. Eat food, not food products."

I imagine a lot of you are thinking, "Yeah. No kidding, Melissa. I've never touched a twinkie in my life," but I want to extend Mr. Pollan's thoughts to health food products, as well. Would your great-great-great-grandmother have recognized vegan bacon? soy burgers? egg replacer? veggie stix? gluten-free flour? pirates' booty?

Remember, margarine used to be considered a health food. Wheat gluten was used by health foodies to make their whole grain breads have a better rise (and now people run from it as if it were the plague). The soy milk craze of the early 2000's ended in us realizing that the soy was genetically modified and that several other unrecognizable ingredients were added to make it smooth and palatable. We also realized that soy is full of

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phytoestrogens and that it was causing endocrine problems for those who consumed too much of it. And who can forget the fat-free fad that began in the late nineties and still continues today? I'm not purporting that pre-made healthfoods are bad for you, I myself have sold thousand of pieces of "key-lime pie" made out of avocados, and "ice cream" made out of cashews! I am suggesting that it's important to question even the health food products of our time. In truth, some are good and some are bad.

3) Is it something everyone is trying on social media? Are there suddenly new hashtags surrounding it? Does it keep going in and out of popularity?

A food fad happens when a particular diet or food enjoys a spike in popularity and then fades. A food fad or fad diet may enjoy many cycles or variations of its popularity over several years, but it is often short-lived. Think kale chips, the paleo diet, green smoothies, the Atkins diet, flour-free banana pancakes, etc.

It's a little known fact that the paleo diet has been around for nearly forty years. The first book ever published on the paleo diet was called The Stone Age Diet by Voegtlin in 1975, followed by another in 1988 and several in the 90's. In 2013, The Paleo Diet was the most searched for method of weight-loss. What I want to point out here, though, is that

Whole30, a variation of the Paleo diet, has all but completely overtaken the basic paleo premise in 2014, and the corresponding book, It Starts with Food, is now on the New York Time Bestseller list, enjoying a popularity that programs like The South Beach Diet and The Atkins Diet had in years past. If you watch closely enough, you'll notice that next year, and the year after that, another way of eating will take us by storm and that probably the paleo diet will, at some point, come back into popularity.

Additionally, you don't have to be immersed in the health food movement to be apprised of the current food fads. Unless you don't participate in social media, you've surely got friends who are posting about the results of their current experiences with food fad trends. You can search the hashtags, #nanaicecream #rawvegan #cacao #fermented #cleaneating and #chiaseeds to get an idea of the current food fads, and if you search #diet, which itself boasts over eleven million tags on instagram alone, you'll find people have tagged every new diet fad you could ever think of.

4) Does it promise weight loss or fat loss? Are one of the three macronutrients cut out or minimized (fats, carbs and protein)?

In my lectures and webinars on nutrition, even with my nutrition clients, the first thing I always do is to go over the macronutrients. I myself, don't have a degree in nutrition, but, as a famous woman once

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said to a group of men who asked what qualified her to share evidence-based medicine with them, "I can read." There is irrefutable evidence and science to show that our bodies absolutely need macronutrients to survive. We could go for a short time without any of the micronutrients like vitamins and minerals (as we've read about with the sailors of old who developed scurvy from lack of vitamin C, but didn't necessarily die) but we cannot live for very long without protein, carbohydrates and fats.

If you take a look at all the diets or food "programs" you can think of, you'll notice that every one of them drastically reduces the allowed amount of one or more of the macronutrients. You can bet that when your body is starved for fat, you are going to lose fat. When your body is starved of protein, you are going to start losing muscle mass (ketosis), and when you are starved of carbohydrates, your body will lose both.

In truth, because of this, these diets do work -- for a time.

A huge body of evidence shows that when you start eating normally again, though, you gain back the weight you lost, plus some. I like to think of it as your body's way of protecting itself against the possible onslaught of further starvation.

5) If all you had to rely upon was what grew and could be produced locally, would you be able to realistically eat this way?

Thankfully, we have access to more foods than ever before in the history of time. We can get coconut milk in a can off the shelf, frozen blueberries in winter, oranges all year round. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. It's wonderful that we can afford to eat such a variety of different foods. It's also good for our health to be able to eat berries and greens whenever we want.

Where it becomes a problem is when every meal takes exotic ingredients from around the world and out of season.

We know that when we eat foods in season, they have more nutrients and are better tasting. We also know that there's a reason why heavy, starchy, "warm" foods such as butternut squash and potatoes are harvested and ready to consume right before and throughout the winter. And there's a reason why our bodies need light, water-full, "cool" foods during summer like cucumbers, tomatoes and watermelons. There is also a lot of anecdotal information stating that eating foods local to our regions, such as honey, may assist in developing better immunity and overall health in general. While not proven yet, researchers are studying these theories.

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We do know, however, that unless you live in the region, eating a "travel-weary" peach in December from Argentina or a watermelon from Mexico in February is probably not the best nutrition.

Ask yourself, "If my diet or way of eating takes hours and hours to prepare, requires me to venture to six different specialty stores to purchase ingredients that are from far away countries, (not to mention having some expensive kitchen equipment) could it be a fad and maybe not the most optimal for my physical (and emotional) health?"

6) Is it an "elitist" diet or food? Could a poor person afford to eat this way and still get enough calories and nutrients?

Most of the healthiest foods in the world are inexpensive. Beans, eggs, rice, squash, cabbage, lentils, carrots. Coconuts are even inexpensive if you live where they're grown.

I think the myth of "it's too expensive to eat healthy food" comes from the plethora of health food diets, health food snacks and pre-prepared foods that require you get a second job to afford. No, the irony that I sell high-priced health food products is not lost on me here, but honestly, my treats, along with all pre-prepared health foods should be meant as every-once-in-a-while treats.

The majority of one's food budget should be spent on wholesome, nutrient-dense foods that you have to cook. Before you go on saying, "Easy for you to say, Melissa, I've got [fill in the blank with your best excuse]," know that I get that it's hard. I've got four kids and I'm a single mom. I feel like all I do is work and sometimes the last thing I want to do is cook. The point is that starting a new fad diet requiring mostly expensive ingredients or trying to afford to fill your kids' lunch boxes with all the latest vegan and gluten-free pre-packaged snacks is not healthier than taking the time to cook meals and teach your kids to cook meals with real, normal, inexpensive, regular old ingredients like onions and apples and potatoes.

7) If you were invited to dinner, would your friends and/or family have to prepare a special meal for you in addition to the meal served to everyone else?

I attended an eating disorders conference early this year where there was much ado about the current gluten-free fad. One of the most startling statistics I heard was that only 3% of those who eat gluten-free diets have actually been diagnosed with Celiac Disease. Does this mean that I don't believe you if you feel better when you don't eat gluten? No. Absolutely not. I've talked to enough people who feel horrible when they eat foods that contain gluten to know that there's definitely something going on, but we've jumped on to the

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gluten-free bandwagon so whole-heartedly, we've failed to stop and question or even consider what other things could be happening.

In the same conference, in my work with my own eating disorder clients and in talking with my business partner who is a licensed clinical social worker and recovered from an eating disorder herself, I've also learned that avoiding, or feeling anxiety around social events where a meal is served or food is present, is one of the first signs of an eating disorder.

Fifteen years ago, when I first began holding doula trainings, I served basic wholesome lunches and snacks, now I have to make sure to provide gluten-free meals and snacks for those who would otherwise not be able to participate in our lunches, and vegan meals for those who are vegan. This would be all well and good if we were healthier now than we were fifteen or even twenty-five years ago, but we're not, and now we're even having a hard time coming together for the age-old cultural tradition of the simple meal.

If your diet or new way of eating causes you to avoid social events, you may want to ask yourself if what you're dealing with is a food fad and whether or not it's sustainable. You may also consider reading our fantastic article on Orthorexia, a new type of eating disorder that is showing up in those of us who are well and eating plenty, but tend to

get obsessed with health foodism. You can find it at MelissaChappell.com under the Real Health section on our articles page.

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Now that you've made it through all seven "ways to spot a food fad," you must know that I'm not advocating for never trying new things or never buying expensive foods and exotic ingredients or never trying a new ingredient in your smoothie or salad. What I am advocating for is a return to the real and the basic with regard to food, a return to using your intuition and listening to your body, a return to being a thinking and questioning person and not blindly following what everyone on social media is doing.

We owe it to the health of our bodies. We owe it to the health of our minds. We owe it to the health of our souls.

author: melissa chappell

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