

# Do Diets Actually Work for Weight Loss?

By Kim Haslam

Dieting has existed for centuries - for as long as humans have had the idea that one particular body type or shape was better than another. With 64% of the UK population currently classified as obese or overweight, it's understandable why dieting remains so popular.

Not only are we bombarded with images and ideas about what our bodies should *look* like, we also have our health to consider. Post-covid, many more of us are interested in improving our health, with much of the focus falling on eating more healthily and losing weight. Obesity is considered a risk factor for the development of many chronic health conditions including diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Maintaining a healthy weight is an important part of reducing our risk for these diseases.

The unfortunate reality is that most people who go on a diet ultimately end up *gaining* weight. Dieters gain almost an extra stone (11 pounds, to be exact) on top of their pre-dieting weight for each diet they go on. The evidence suggests that dieting actually makes us *gain* weight in the long run, which begs the question: why doesn't dieting work, and what *does* work?

## From The Ancient Greeks to Modern Science

The origins of the word 'diet' came from the Ancient Greeks, but the word *diata* referred to more than just what a person ate. It encompassed a whole way of living, including food, drink, exercise and lifestyle. I feel that this is the essence of why modern dieting doesn't work: that is, we too often think that losing weight is just a matter of what we eat, when in reality, a number of different factors are matter too.

Scientific research has echoed the idea that losing weight is about much more than just 'calories in, calories out'. For example, our gut bacteria have control over how many calories of the food we eat are actually *absorbed*. Our gut bacteria can be affected by everything from medication, to stress and of course what we eat. Certain types of bacteria will encourage us to extract *more* of the calories that we eat, which could lead to weight gain. Perhaps that explains that one person you know who seems to eat about 4,000 calories a day and yet somehow manages to never gain weight.

## Why Dieting Doesn't Work

In my experience, another problem with dieting may be related to the concept of 'restricting'. Psychologically, restriction can lead to greater cravings, and also potentially set us up for overeating and binge eating. Extreme restriction isn't sustainable, and we have biological mechanisms that will eventually override that behaviour in the interest of our own survival. Under-eating can trigger a primal drive to increase calorie intake which can be impossible to resist, and can lead to episodes of binge eating.

If we approach dieting with a mindset of restriction and deprivation, we may be setting ourselves up for failure by working against our biology. Most dieting relies on some form of restriction, which just isn't sustainable in the long term. Once it becomes unsustainable, the dieter often returns to their previous eating and lifestyle habits, and the weight returns.

Another reason we may gain weight after dieting is related to changes in body composition. When it comes to losing weight, we want to lose excess fat, *not* muscle. Excess fat is unhealthy as it is capable of producing hormones including oestrogen, which can itself predispose us to weight gain.

When people go on diets, they tend to lose both muscle *and* fat. When they regain weight, they tend to gain fat. This results in a net-loss of muscle, which is important because muscle is more metabolically active than fat. Muscle burns seven times more calories than fat, making it metabolically more valuable when it comes to losing weight - because it burns more calories at rest than fat does. The effect of gaining fat and losing muscle is that the metabolism is effectively slowed down, and even fewer calories are then required to maintain this new, heavier weight.

## **If Dieting Doesn't Work, How Can I Lose Weight?**

### **1. Mindset First**

My best advice for losing weight is to firstly recognise that it is about much more than just what you eat. If you're at war with your own body, it's going to be hard to get it to do what you want it to do. Self compassion and acceptance are an important part of the mindset for weight loss, and there is scientific research that shows that higher levels of self-compassion reduce the likelihood of weight gain in stressful environments.

### **2. Stress Management**

Stress management is also really important. Higher levels of circulating cortisol (our stress hormone) can cause us to develop belly fat. Mindfulness meditation can help reduce stress levels, but ultimately, getting down to the root cause of the stress response is key to rewiring ourselves for lower stress levels. In clinic, some of the root causes of stress I see are poor body image leading to overexercising and negative self talk, loneliness brought on by a lack of a sense of community and absence of deep and meaningful relationships, and a lack of connection to purpose leading to a sense of feeling depleted and directionless. For some individuals, overeating can be a way to avoid these challenging feelings.

### **3. Exercise**

My best exercise hack is to find exercise that doesn't feel like exercise. I personally hate cardio - it bores me to tears and I can't think of anything worse than running on a treadmill staring at a wall in the gym. So I do something called Forro - it's a type of Brazilian partner dancing, a little bit like salsa - and hours whiz by without me even noticing. Trick yourself into doing the exercise you hate.

Although most of us associate cardio with weight loss, building muscle is actually more important. As I mentioned before, muscle burns a lot more calories than fat does. So get lifting weights. Go alone and listen to music, go to a class, find yourself a gym buddy - whatever makes it feel like fun. If you don't enjoy it, you won't do it.

### **4. Focus On The Positive**

Aside from improving your health, try to pinpoint the exact reasons you want to lose weight. What will change for the better if you lose weight? How will it make you feel? There is often a lot of negative emotion around weight loss which leads to guilt and shame. Guilt and shame are terrible motivators, but by focusing on the potential positive outcomes, you'll feel more inspired to move towards your goals.

### **5. Find a Way of Eating That Works For You**

Diets *can* help with the process of losing weight. My clients have had a lot of success with ketogenic diets, paleo diets and intermittent fasting, but it is important to use them in the right way. They aren't a 'cheat code' or a quick fix, but they can be part of a larger intervention that addresses the multiple factors that regulate our weight. Certain diets work better than others, and it's about finding which one works for you, and then after the desired weight loss has been achieved, transitioning to a way of eating that is delicious, practical and therefore sustainable.

Most diets don't work for weight loss, but the right diet can help you move in the right direction. Our modern approach to dieting is overly-simplistic, and unless we consider the deeper reasons for weight gain in the first place, we're not getting to the root cause of the issue and any diet we attempt will be nothing more than a 'band aid'. If you're concerned about your weight, I recommend you talk to a knowledgeable practitioner who can help support you through the process.