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What’s on your plate: Breaking down the latest diet trends

By Suzanne Pfefferle Tafur
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WHEN IT COMES TO LOSING WEIGHT,

there's more to consider than just diet and exercise. Becky Caracci (www.beckycaracci.com), a certified health coach, says you first have to determine why you want to lose weight, and then decide how you're going to make it happen.

As a health coach who holds a degree in dietetics and nutrition from Louisiana State University (as well as a representative for Juice Plus+ nutrition supplements), Caracci is an expert on fitness and nutrition, but she also seeks to understand the psychological component of her clients' eating and exercise habits. She tries to make clients aware of why they've developed those habits and the reasons they've started a diet.

"It's easy to educate a person about healthy eating and what they should be doing from an activity-level standpoint, but it's another challenge to motivate that person to break unhealthy habits," Caracci says.

She believes there are benefits to starting a diet that go beyond weight loss, a diet that instead motivates people to learn more about the science of nutrition and exercise.

But there can be a downside, she says.

“Most (diets) are [difficult] to sustain for the long run,” Caracci says. “If you try something and lose 10 to 20 pounds, and then return back to the way you were eating and you gain it all back, that's defeating.”

Caracci discusses current diet trends, explains how each one works and weighs in on each diet's safety and effectiveness.

The keto diet

With the ketogenic diet, you drastically reduce carbohydrate intake and replace the deficit with fats, which sends your body into ketosis, Caracci says. Since your body doesn't have carbs to burn for energy, it burns fats instead.

Doctors have found that the keto diet is effective in treating children with epilepsy, and it also helps Type 2 diabetics quickly decrease their sugar intake. But when you attempt to reduce consumption of unhealthy carbs like sugar, Caracci says, you may also reduce the carbs found in fruits and vegetables, which contain micronutrients. Those micronutrients help you build immunity, get better sleep and function in general.

“It’s your medicine really,” she says.

“Omitting a food group is a bad idea. If you're reducing your carb intake to the point where you're not eating enough fruits and vegetables, I don't approve of that.”

The pegan diet

The pegan diet combines elements of the vegan diet (which excludes consumption of all animal-based products) and the paleo diet. The paleo diet prohibits grains because it’s “based on what our ancient ancestors supposedly ate during the Paleolithic era” — nuts, seeds, vegetation and free-range animals and fish, Caracci says.

“If you're following a vegan diet because you're passionate about animal rights, I get it,” she says. “If you're following a vegan diet for weight loss, I don't think it's appropriate because a vegan diet omits protein that you can find in some very healthy animal products.”

With the pegan diet, however, you eat foods that are low in sugar, along with plants, grass-fed animals and other natural ingredients. Caracci doesn't like that the pegan diet, like the paleo diet, omits grains. Whole-wheat carbohydrates provide B vitamins and energy, she says.

Intermittent fasting

Intermittent fasting is “not so much about what you eat, but when you eat,” Caracci says. This diet requires fasting for two nonconsecutive days a week by eating one small meal each of those days. During the “feed days” of the week, you can eat “whatever you want,” as long as you include produce and foods that are not heavily processed, she says.

“I'm going to recommend intermittent fasting as a strategy if my client is very focused, determined and can stay the course with it,” she says. “Otherwise, it's pretty difficult to maintain.”



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Plant-based diet

People on a plant-based diet eat about five servings of vegetables and four servings of fruit per day.

“For each meal, half of your plate should be filled with produce,” Caracci says. “It's all about replacing an animal product here and there with a plant.”

Not only do fruits and vegetables contain micronutrients, but they have plenty of fiber, which benefits your digestive health. Caracci believes that no matter your specific diet, everyone should consume multiple servings of fresh produce every day.

Mindful eating

With mindful eating, you eat when you're hungry and stop when you're full, says Caracci, adding that you should slow down while dining and enjoy your food.

“The whole idea with this diet is that you put your phone down, turn the television off and just practice the habit of eating mindfully,” she says. “We live in such a fast-paced society where everything is meant to be convenient. Well, convenient (food) usually means processed (food). If we're eating it on the run, there's a good chance we're not even paying attention to what we're eating.”



Easing diet discomfort

Gastrointestinal (GI) problems are an unfortunate side effect of healthy eating, Caracci says.

Some foods that are filled with the micronutrients we need can cause bloating and cramps. Vegetables — the food group that's the focus of nearly every diet — tend to be the culprits because they contain an ample dose of fiber.

Broccoli, cauliflower, onions, garlic, cabbage and Brussels sprouts are the top offenders, she says.

There are two kinds of fibers: soluble and insoluble. Soluble fibers are absorbed by your gut bacteria and, in most cases, help you maintain healthy intestines and normal bodily functions, Caracci explains. But people who are sensitive to soluble fiber can experience intestinal distress.

Caracci says the body can better digest foods that have been cooked (steamed, roasted, boiled or sauteed).

“It starts the digestion process for your body,” she says. “So, when you eat it, it's a little easier to digest, so you have less distress in your intestines.”

Also, make sure to chew your food thoroughly, because saliva breaks down food particles. This may seem like an obvious suggestion, but, as Caracci points out, we're often talking while we're eating, so we don't take time to chew our food.

If your gut already is inflamed, consider taking a probiotic. Caracci gets her probiotics by eating plain Greek yogurt every day and taking commercial supplements.