

# RATING THE DIETS

FROM



TO

Dr. Sears  
**ZONE**

**With two-thirds of American adults now overweight or obese, the need for effective weight-loss diets has never been greater. But it's hard to know where to turn amid the sea of promises and glowing "results not typical" testimonials. Now CONSUMER REPORTS has taken the wraps off nine popular diets.**

Using a powerful nutritional-analysis database, we calculated the calorie counts and nutrient composition of a week's worth of menus from each plan. We checked whether the diets conformed to the 2005 U.S. dietary guidelines, which our experts agree represent the current best advice on long-term healthful nutrition. To evaluate the diets' effectiveness—how much weight people actually lost and how many people were able to stick to the diet—we conducted a comprehensive review and synthesis of published clinical research. (We plan to update our analysis whenever new studies are published.)

The Ratings (see page 21) identified some diet winners and will help you choose one that makes sense for you. Among our findings:

**Carbs, schmearbs.** One of the top-rated diets, Weight Watchers, pointedly ignores the low-carb fad. It recommends even more carbohydrate calories than the typical American diet contains, with heavy emphasis on fiber from whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. And it keeps fat calories to less than a quarter of the total. Weight Watchers had the best overall adherence rate of any that we studied.

**Drink your diet.** Slim-Fast, a commercial diet that replaces parts of two meals a day with its shakes or bars, rated favor-

ably on the strength of its strong short-term weight-loss results and balanced nutrition. But its high long-term dropout rate suggests that after awhile, people may tire of its limited menu.

**What about Atkins?** The Atkins diet worked very well in the short term, with results at least as good as our other top-rated diets. But its nutritional deficiencies—too much fat and saturated fat, too little fiber, too few fruits—depressed its overall Rating and might have a negative effect on some dieters' health.

**Popular but unproven.** The much-touted South Beach and Jenny Craig diets still lack scientific data to back up their claims. The South Beach Diet has been studied in two clinical trials that lasted just three months each,

so we couldn't rate its overall efficacy. Jenny Craig offers good nutrition, but it has never been studied in a clinical trial.

**Online: More info needed.** We could not rate eDiets.com, the largest online diet site, because the only available research study was too small for us to rely on its results.

Our review of the diet studies also confirmed the value of four key techniques that should help you stick to any diet, including one you devise yourself.

## COMBATING DIET DROPOUT

"The best diet is the one you can stay on," says Cathy Nonas, R.D., M.S., a long-time obesity researcher who heads the

obesity and diabetes program at North General Hospital in New York.

As researchers have repeatedly found, the inability to adhere to diets is the main barrier to permanent weight loss. For example, researchers randomly assigned groups of 40 overweight volunteers to follow either the Atkins, Ornish, Weight Watchers, or Zone diet for a year, in a Tufts-New England Medical Center study published in the January 5, 2005, *Journal of the American Medical Association*. In the first two months, 21 percent of dieters dropped out; by the end of the year, 45 percent of them had quit.

Moreover, even the volunteers who stuck with the study didn't follow their diets very strictly. The Atkins people were supposed to be consuming no more than

30 to 35 grams of carbohydrates per day. After a month on the diet, they were eating about twice that much, on average. Those people assigned to the ultra-high-fiber Ornish diet ended the year consuming, on average, about as many grams of fiber per

day as they had been before they started the diet. Regardless of the assigned diet, the average participant in the study didn't come close to the modest benchmark we had set for successful weight loss after one year: a weight reduction of at least 5 percent.

On the other hand, staying on a diet and losing a significant amount of weight is not impossible. In that same Tufts study, the participants who followed their pre-



## A DIET FOR LIFE

**A balanced, low-fat diet plus weekly meetings give this large commercial weight-loss program the highest long-term adherence rate of any diet in our analysis.**

scribed diets the most faithfully shed the most weight. Our own survey of some 32,000 dieting CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers, published in 2002, found that nearly a quarter managed to take off at least 10 percent of their starting weight and keep it off for a year or more. That is a weight loss that scientific research shows will markedly reduce the long-term risk of obesity-related ills such as diabetes. And five of the nine diets we analyzed for this report have at least one published study showing that people who stayed on the diet for at least six months lost more than 5 percent of their starting weight.

Adherence is important for another reason, too: To maintain lost weight, dieters must permanently reduce their calorie intake because they will need fewer calories to fuel their now-smaller body. That's why the best weight-loss diet is one that you can follow for life.

#### FOUR WAYS TO A WINNING DIET

No matter what the specifics of a diet, if it's low enough in calories, you can lose weight on it. The trick is to cut calories in a way that you can tolerate. That's not easy, because appetite is a personal phenomenon that can't be easily manipulated. "Some people will eat a spoonful of mashed potatoes and say, 'OK, that's enough,'" says Adam Drewnowski, Ph.D., director of the Nutritional Sciences Program at the University of Washington. "Other people will eat a whole bowl."

The diets we rated all use one or more of these four powerful techniques to keep people on track and losing weight:

**Eat bulky, low-calorie foods.** One way people know they've eaten enough is that their stomach feels full, so filling up on high-bulk, low-calorie foods is a promising strategy for curbing hunger while keeping calories down.

There can be a huge variation in calo-

ries among foods that take up the same amount of space on the plate (and in your stomach). A one-half cup of strawberries has about the same weight as a 4-inch strawberry Danish pastry, yet contains about one-tenth as many calories. Therefore strawberries have one-tenth the "energy density" of pastries. In general, fruits, vegetables, and other water-filled foods such as soups have the lowest energy density, while pastries and high-fat foods such as cheeses, nuts, and oils have the highest energy density. Meats and dairy foods are in-between.

In a series of lab experiments, Barbara Rolls, Ph.D., and her colleagues

#### Free at ConsumerReports.org

Use our calculator to determine your daily calorie needs. Available free from May 10 to July 6. Click on "Health & fitness" on the home page and see "Calorie-needs calculator."

## Nine ways to get your nine a day

### ADDING VEGETABLES AND FRUITS THE EASY WAY

"Are you kidding?" was the reaction in January when the federal government boosted recommendations for vegetables and fruit to nine daily servings for a person consuming a 2,000-calorie diet. That's a tall order, since at last count the average American ate only about three servings of vegetables a day.

But growing evidence about the disease-fighting benefits of eating a wide variety of produce makes the nine-a-day dietary

goal worth striving for. And serving sizes are small: one-half cup for most fruits and vegetables. For leafy greens, a serving is a cup. For fruit, it's a medium-sized piece of whole fruit. A serving of fruit or vegetable juice is 6 ounces.

We asked dietitians to provide some tips for bulking up, and diversifying, the produce content of your diet and overcoming three common barriers to eating more fruits and vegetables.

#### THE TASTE BARRIER

**Disguise the taste.** Add veggies to dishes you already like, such as pasta, stews, and pizza. Or use a little fat—olive oil, melted cheese, almond slivers—to enhance the flavor of vegetables served alone. In a casserole recipe, substitute vegetable juice for water.

**Change the texture.** Prepare soup with puréed broccoli or cauliflower. The smoother texture might up the appeal. Add low-fat milk for a creamier texture.

**Remember salsa.** Spoon it on top of broiled chicken, fish, and other plain fare. To make your own, combine chopped red or green peppers, black beans, corn, scallions, cilantro, lime juice, red-wine vinegar, cumin, salt, and hot peppers, if desired. Stir and chill. Add mango to sneak in a fruit serving.

#### THE WASTE BARRIER

**Avoid the waste of spoiled produce by stocking up on less-perishable veggies.** Carrots, cabbage, and some squashes keep well. So do dried fruits. And remember: Beans count as a vegetable, and dried or canned beans have a long shelf life.

**Use frozen.** Fresh, frozen, and many canned fruits and vegetables are healthful. Add frozen mixed veggies to cooking pasta about 2 minutes before it's done. Drain and sprinkle with a little olive oil and Parmesan for pasta primavera.

**Don't forget breakfast.** Add vegetables to scrambled eggs or omelets, or bake a fritatta (right). Use up fruits by mixing with yogurt or cereal.



#### THE NO-TIME-TO-COOK BARRIER

**Bag it.** Put baby carrots, grape tomatoes, or celery sticks in a sealable bag for snacking at work or while running errands. Pack a trail mix with dried fruits. (Note that the serving size for dried fruit is only one-fourth cup.) Or pick up packaged, already cut-up vegetables and fruits at the grocery store or deli.

**Zap it.** Many vegetables will cook up fine in the microwave. Try putting fresh asparagus in a little water with a squeeze of lemon; cover and cook on high power for 2 to 3 minutes or to desired tenderness.

**Order a veggie sandwich.** Or add extra vegetables, such as mushrooms or avocado slices, to the standard lettuce and tomato on any sandwich. Ask if you can substitute spinach leaves for less-healthy iceberg lettuce.

at Pennsylvania State University have shown that people tend to eat the same volume of food, and feel just as full afterwards, despite differences in calories.

Though Volumetrics, the low-energy-density diet that Rolls created, has not yet been validated with a published clinical trial, several other diets we analyzed use similar techniques. For instance, the Ornish diet, with its emphasis on whole grains, legumes, and vegetables, is even lower in energy density than the Volumetrics plan. The Zone diet is also low-density because it calls for large servings of vegetables.

Rolls considers foods with less than a calorie per gram to be low in energy density. All the diets we analyzed met that



## DELIVERY ZONE

Many companies have capitalized on this diet's popularity by offering home delivery of "Zone favorable" meals. You can even get a kosher version.

benchmark except for the Atkins diet and Jenny Craig. From lowest density to highest, they were: Ornish, Volumetrics, eDiets, Zone, Slim-Fast, South Beach Phase Two, Weight Watchers, and South Beach Phase One.

**Control blood sugar.** Three of the diets we analyzed—Atkins, South Beach, and the Zone—specifically claim to work by controlling insulin. And all three do, indeed, fall into the broad category of "low-glycemic" diets: that is, they prescribe foods that suppress the increase in blood sugar that inevitably results from eating certain

carbohydrates. The diets claim that this reduces hunger.

There are several ways to reduce the glycemic load of a diet. One is to include plenty of fat and protein, neither of which has much effect on blood sugar. Another is to stay away from starchy, easy-to-digest carbohydrates such as refined flour, white rice, and potatoes, and to avoid any kind of added sugar. Instead, eat plenty of high-fiber carbs such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.

The Atkins diet and the first phase of South Beach use the high-fat, high-protein strategy. The Zone diet and the second phase of the South Beach diet also prescribe a high-protein diet, but are more moderate in fat and include copious amounts of high-fiber vegetables.

## CR Quick Recommendations

All the diets we evaluated restricted calories and contained fewer servings of breads and grains than specified by the 2005 U.S. dietary guidelines. Most had far more vegetable servings. Calorie-reducing strategies used by the diets vary considerably. We describe those strategies below, along with our impression of the recipes provided for each diet and of the type of eaters that the diet may suit best.

### QUICK PICKS

#### If you want a variety of foods:

##### 1 Weight Watchers

This plan doesn't exclude any food group and doesn't take any of the "macronutrients"—fat, protein, and carbohydrates—to extremes. The diet's point system encourages consumption of low-fat, high-fiber meals. Weekly group meetings and weigh-ins provide behavioral support. Most recipes seem appetizing and fairly simple to prepare if you don't mind cooking.

#### If you don't like to cook:

##### 2 Slim-Fast

Branded bars and drinks replace part of breakfast and lunch. Dieters need to prepare only one full meal a day. Some suggested dinner recipes require cooking skills.

#### If you are a vegetarian:

##### 4 Ornish

Professional chefs created very-low-fat vegetarian recipes for the Ornish book (but we

judge they require time and cooking skills to make). Ultra-low-fat, high-fiber vegetarian meals provide fairly large portions for the low calories. Strictly following this diet can reverse atherosclerosis in some people. Extremely-high-fiber content could cause initial digestive symptoms.

Weight Watchers, eDiets, and Jenny Craig also offer vegetarian-meal options, though we didn't analyze those menus.

#### If you want a short-term high-protein diet plan:

##### 3 Zone

##### 5 Atkins Induction

##### 6 Atkins Ongoing Weight Loss

There's some evidence that high-protein diets are more satiating. Our medical consultants judge them safe for short-term use except by people who have reduced kidney function. The Zone diet is considerably lower in fat than the Atkins diet. To stay in "the Zone," dieters eat 30 percent of calories from fat, 40 percent from carbs, and 30 percent from protein at every meal. Recipes are simple to prepare, but following the diet without recipes can be complicated. Atkins Induction is an ultra-low-carbohydrate, high-fat, high-protein diet meant to be followed for about two weeks. Recipes seem very simple to prepare. One sample menu called for many Atkins branded products. Atkins Ongoing Weight Loss is similar to Atkins Induction, but it allows slightly more carbohydrates, though little to no grains and very few fruits.

## THE OTHER DIETS

While the following diets are low enough in calories to produce weight loss, we could not rate them because they lacked data from large, long-term published clinical trials.

### 7 eDiets

Low-calorie diet customized to your preferences. Online access to support groups, experts, menu plans, recipes. Recipes seem appetizing and fairly simple to prepare for those who don't mind cooking.

### 8 Jenny Craig

Branded single-serving entrées, supplemented with dairy, salads, and other vegetables prepared by the dieter. Weekly counseling at company centers or by phone. Our calorie count was about 20 percent higher than the meal plan indicated.

### 9 South Beach Phase One

Low-glycemic meals high in "good" fats and lean protein, very low in carbohydrates. No fruits allowed. Most recipes seem appetizing and easy to prepare for those who don't mind cooking.

### 10 South Beach Phase Two

Less fat and protein, more high-fiber carbs than in Phase One. Most fruits allowed. Recipes seem similar in appeal and ease of preparation to those in Phase One.

### 11 Volumetrics

Filling but low-calorie foods such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy and meats, soups, and stews. Recipes seem appetizing but require cooking time.

Research on low-glycemic diets suggests they can help in weight control. Clinical trials have found that both the Zone and Atkins diets are effective in the short term, though less so in the long term. Other studies have found that low-glycemic meals seem to help people feel fuller longer than high-glycemic ones, which may be one reason why low-glycemic diets work.

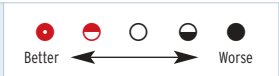
Researchers are still debating whether low-glycemic diets are really more effective than other types. Studies to date show that people who lose weight on low-glycemic diets do it the conventional way: by ingesting fewer calories than they burn.

**Measure portions.** The philosophy of controlled-portion diets is straightforward: Eliminate the possibility of portion-estimating errors by using prepackaged low-calorie food. Our study includes two such diets. The Slim-Fast diet replaces part of breakfast and lunch with its branded drinks or bars, and prescribes a moderate-calorie regular meal for supper. Jenny Craig participants eat its controlled-portion replacements for most or all meals, and even some snacks. Weight Watchers offers the option of using its branded controlled-calorie frozen entrées. The Weight Watchers menu we used did not include those products.

Slim-Fast is one of the best-researched of all the diets we rated, and it is highly effective in the short term. It's not possible to say for sure how well Jenny Craig works because there are no clinical trial results.

Studies of nonbranded controlled-portion diets also show they are an effective weight-loss tool. A study of 302 high-risk overweight volunteers, conducted at five medical centers, found that the group assigned to receive prepared, controlled-calorie, nutritionally balanced meals lost three times as much weight in one year as the group put on a standard low-fat diet.

# Ratings diets



In performance order. **Blue** key numbers indicate Quick Picks; see box on page 20.

Key number	Diet	Price <sup>1</sup>	Overall score	Analytical results					Average daily calories	Nutritional content					
				6 months		1 year				Percent of calories					
				Nutrition	Weight loss	Dropout rate	Weight loss	Dropout rate		Fat	Saturated fat	Carbohydrates	Protein	Grams of fiber/1,000 cal.	Fruits & veggies—daily servings
<b>1</b>	<b>Weight Watchers</b>	\$10 to \$13 per week	●	●	○	●	○	●	1,450	24	7	56	20	20	11
<b>2</b>	<b>Slim-Fast</b>	\$2 to \$3 per day for bars or drinks	●	●	○	●	○	●	1,540	22	6	57	21	21	12
<b>3</b>	<b>Zone</b> (men's menu) ("The Zone," by Barry Sears, Ph.D., with Bill Lawren) <sup>2</sup>	\$25.00	●	●	○	○	○	●	1,660	27	7	42	30	21	17
<b>4</b>	<b>Ornish</b> ("Eat More, Weigh Less," by Dean Ornish, M.D.)	\$15.00	○	○	○	●	●	●	1,520	6	1	77	16	31	17
<b>5</b>	<b>Atkins</b> Ongoing Weight Loss (OWL) ("Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution," by Robert C. Atkins, M.D.) <sup>3</sup>	\$13.95	○	●	○	○	○	○	1,520	60	20	11	29	12	6
<b>6</b>	<b>Atkins</b> Induction ("Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution," by Robert C. Atkins, M.D.) <sup>3</sup>	\$13.95	○	●	○	○	○	○	1,640	61	19	8	31	8	6

**NOT RATED: INSUFFICIENT STUDY DATA** (diets listed in alphabetical order)

<b>7</b>	<b>eDiets</b>	\$12 to \$32 per month	-	●	-	-	-	-	1,450	23	5	53	24	19	12
<b>8</b>	<b>Jenny Craig</b>	\$6 to \$7.65 per week, \$11 to \$15 per day (food)	-	●	-	-	-	-	1,520	18	7	62	20	16	6
<b>9</b>	<b>South Beach</b> Phase One ("The South Beach Diet," by Arthur Agatston, M.D.)	\$24.95	-	○	-	-	-	-	1,530	51	14	15	34	9	12
<b>10</b>	<b>South Beach</b> Phase Two ("The South Beach Diet," by Arthur Agatston, M.D.)	\$24.95	-	○	-	-	-	-	1,340	39	9	38	22	19	13
<b>11</b>	<b>Volumetrics</b> ("The Volumetrics Eating Plan," by Barbara Rolls, Ph.D.)	\$25.95	-	●	-	-	-	-	1,500	23	7	55	22	20	14

<sup>1</sup> Except where noted, price is for the book. <sup>2</sup> Women's menu similar but about 1,300 calories. <sup>3</sup> Studies of Atkins used first the induction and then the ongoing diet plans, so our 6-month and 1-year results include both phases.

## Guide to the Ratings

**Overall score** is based on adherence to nutritional guidelines and the results of clinical studies of each diet. We included all published, randomized, controlled clinical trials that included more than 40 subjects on the diet studied and lasted six months or longer. Diets for which there was insufficient clinical study data were not given an overall score. **Nutritional content** was calculated from a computerized nutritional analysis of a week's worth of menus from each diet, using The Food Processor software from ESHA Research. Higher scores went to diets that conformed most closely to the recommendations

reported in the 2005 U.S. dietary guidelines: 20 to 35 percent of calories from fat, with less than 10 percent from saturated fat; 45 to 65 percent from carbohydrates; 10 to 35 percent from protein; more than 14 grams of fiber per 1,000 calories. **Average daily calories** and servings of fruits and vegetables are listed in the Ratings for information only and are not part of our overall nutrition score. Dietary guidelines call for 6 to 7 servings a day in 1,400- to 1,600-calorie-a-day diets. **Analytical results**, including short- and long-term weight-loss and dropout rates, were derived from published studies for each diet.

# Three diets, three dinners

These dinner menus are based on the principles of the Atkins, Ornish, and Weight Watchers diets, with fat, protein, and carbohydrates in their prescribed proportions, using the same types of

foods whenever possible. To fill you up, the Atkins dinner offers the most satiating protein, but the Ornish meal provides more than twice the weight of low-fat, high-carbohydrate food.

		
<p><b>ATKINS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roasted chicken leg and thigh, skin on, prepared with butter</li> <li>• Green salad, low-carb Atkins brand dressing</li> </ul> <p><b>CALORIES: 580</b> <b>ENERGY DENSITY:</b> <b>1.8 calories per gram</b></p>	<p><b>ORNISH</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rice and beans</li> <li>• Broccoli</li> <li>• Green salad, fat-free low-sugar dressing</li> </ul> <p><b>CALORIES: 490</b> <b>ENERGY DENSITY:</b> <b>0.67 calories per gram</b></p>	<p><b>WEIGHT WATCHERS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roasted, skinless chicken breast</li> <li>• Rice</li> <li>• Broccoli, low-fat margarine</li> <li>• Green salad, low-fat dressing</li> </ul> <p><b>CALORIES: 515</b> <b>ENERGY DENSITY:</b> <b>0.84 calories per gram</b></p>

**Seek encouragement.** Of all the diet strategies, personal support is the most successful. In our 2002 survey, the dieters who worked one-on-one with a counselor said it was second in effectiveness only to devising their own personal diet and exercise plan. Three diets on our list employ behavioral support. Weight Watchers does it in group-motivation and weigh-in sessions; Jenny Craig, in weekly in-person or telephone meetings with counselors at its retail locations; and eDiets, through online contacts, including live chats with experts as well as fellow dieters. But this behavioral support comes at a cost: an ongoing fee.

Whether delivered individually or in a group, personal



## NO-COOK OPTION

This 180-calorie shake has 5 grams of fiber, 10 grams of protein, and 17 grams of sugar.

behavioral support can help people lose weight. One of the largest diet studies ever conducted, involving more than 3,200 overweight people at high risk for diabetes, found that intensive counseling to support diet and exercise changes worked better than a drug to prevent diabetes and induce weight loss. Many other studies of group counseling have yielded similar results. The dropout rate is generally lower than with other types of diets, and participants lose

a clinically meaningful amount of weight.

The jury is still out on online support. Small-scale experiments have had mixed results, and a single small study of eDiets found a very high dropout rate and poor weight loss.

## THE BEST DIET FOR YOU

"Saying there's one best diet for everyone is a little like saying there's one best type of music for everyone," Michael Dansinger, M.D., director of obesity research at the Atherosclerosis Research Laboratory at Tufts-New England Medical Center, says. People should consider a broad spectrum of options.

Our own data support that statement. The nearly 8,000 most successful dieters in our own survey overwhelmingly listed "my own diet and exercise regimen" as the most effective strategy they used. Only 19 percent had ever attended a commercial program, and less than one-third had bothered to consult any of the then-popular diet books.

Here's our best weight-loss advice, based on our analysis and the advice of our two expert consultants on this project, Cathy Nonas, R.D., M.S., of North General Hospital in New York, and Thomas Wadden, Ph.D., director of the Weight and Eating Disorders Program at the University of Pennsylvania:

**Cut the easiest calories first.** Eliminating the nonnutritive foods that are least important to you can have a major effect, says Nonas. Avoiding sugared soft

drinks and juices and outsized baked goods, such as mega-bagels, alone could eliminate 500 to 1,000 calories a day from some people's diets.

**Choose a safe dietary plan.** If you have any kind of medical condition, check with your doctor before starting a weight-loss attempt, especially if you're drawn to one of the more nutritionally extreme diets such as Ornish or Atkins. Don't strive for rapid weight loss. Losing more than 1 to 2 pounds a week can cause undesirable health effects. Increase fiber intake gradually and drink more water to avoid digestive upsets. And consider taking a multivitamin pill while you're cutting calories.

**Consider personal preferences.** Someone who doesn't like red meat will find Atkins very difficult to follow, and someone who does will probably find the vegetarian Ornish diet intolerable. Those who like variety may tire of the limited menu of a meal-replacement diet.

**Follow the rules.** If the diet says to eat one-half cup of rice, dole it out with a measuring cup. If you're supposed to eat a snack at 3 p.m., eat it. The more faithfully people adhere to a diet, the more successful they will be.

**Be ready to switch.** "You have to 'date' the diets and be ready to fail a few times before you find the one that you can stick with," Dansinger says. If, after three weeks, you find a diet is too difficult or unpleasant to follow, or you are not losing weight—try another.

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