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"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"

What's the Best "Diet"?

If there's a topic everyone seems to have an opinion about, it's which diet to follow to lose weight. This isn't just water-cooler and talk-show discussions--healthcare professionals debate it all the time, especially when a new study demonstrates the benefits of one program over another.

Now finally--finally!--science has compared four of the most popular programs head to head. Researchers presented the results of a study on four popular weight loss programs at the recent American Heart Association national convention.

Researchers recruited 160 subjects and randomly assigned them to one of the following weight loss programs:

- the **Atkins**, a high-protein, low-carbohydrate program;
- the **Ornish**, a vegetarian high-carbohydrate program;
- **Weight Watchers**, a typical high-carbohydrate, moderate-protein, and low-fat program; and
- the **Zone**, a precise program of 40% carbohydrate, 30% protein, and 30% fat.

Subjects were asked to participate in their respective programs for one year. The results were not surprising--except perhaps to the program creators.

The dropout rate for each program was high over 12 months. The highest rate, 50%, applied to both the Atkins and the Ornish plans. Essentially, that means people can't eat high protein and low carbs for a year, nor can they live on twigs and berries on a vegetarian plan. The best compliance was for Weight Watchers and the Zone with 65% completing the program. A balanced diet appears to be better for the long haul.

The best improvement in cardiovascular risk came from the Weight Watchers program, but all diets improved the profile somewhat. What it may mean is that the proportion of carbohydrates, protein, and fat are not as important as being able to sustain a lower caloric intake for a long time. In other words, calories consumed must be less than calories burned. Period.

Probably the most surprising result was the statistically significant but relatively minor average weight loss of about 4.5%. That means that in a year, a 200-pound person following the program (counting only those who completed the study) lost 9 pounds--not exactly a glowing testimonial for a year of following a diet. My experience tells me that most of the weight was lost in the first 30-60 days, and the subjects simply maintained their weight the rest of the year--if they didn't drop out altogether.

Does that mean you should be discouraged? Not in the least. What it means is what you've always really known. If you want to weigh less than you do now, you have to eat less and exercise more--consistently. Not just for a little while--permanently. You have to change your lifestyle. The results of the study seem to show that a balanced approach may be the best approach.

My philosophy is very simple: find the way to eat less and exercise more that fits into your life, and then do it. Don't talk about it at the water cooler--just do it until you achieve a healthy body weight.

Then do you quit? No. You can add a few indulgences to your diet, but you keep eating healthier and exercising for the rest of your life. It will be a longer, fuller life, and that's a pretty good trade-off in anybody's book.