

What to tell your patients about 8 popular weight-loss programs

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Diets that promise quick weight-loss results are eye-catching, but often overlook the principles of long-term, sustainable, healthy eating. Understanding the different types of weight-loss programs and fad diets saturating the market can help physicians provide proper advice for patients.

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That includes “Nutrition Science for Health and Longevity: What Every Physician Needs to Know,” which will help physicians begin an effective nutrition conversation with patients. The four-hour, self-paced course is developed and hosted by the Gaples Institute for Integrative Cardiology, a nonprofit focused on enhancing the role of nutrition and lifestyle in health care, and distributed in collaboration with the AMA Ed Hub.

People often become desperate to lose weight through fad diets. Unfortunately, finding reliable information about these diets and their health benefits is a challenge, according to AMA member Fatima Cody Stanford, MD, MPH, MPA, an obesity medicine specialist in Boston and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. She has co-written a book, “Facing Overweight and Obesity: A Complete Guide for Children and Adults,” with colleagues Jonathan R. Stevens, MD, and Theodore A. Stern, MD.

The book describes 15 diets and weight-loss programs, such as the Cabbage Soup diet or the Zone diet. We will look at eight of those fad diets and weight-loss programs that your patients—whether they have prediabetes, hypertension or are just looking to shed pounds—might participate in.

According to Dr. Stanford and her co-authors, here’s what you should know to advise them properly. None of these comments should be considered an endorsement.

Atkins diet. As a classic low-carb diet, the Atkins diet states it can “flip the body’s metabolic switch” from burning carbohydrates to burning fat. Carbohydrate intake increases as the phases progress. Many dieters have found they are able to lose weight quickly. However, dieters lack an understanding of how to move throughout the different phases. The diet also does not allow a person to enjoy a variety of foods with small recommended portion sizes, making it difficult to achieve adequate nutrition.

Weight Watchers. With a focus on balance, participants are encouraged to make better food choices, move more and shift their diet mindset through daily points. It is designed to assist in weight loss, but also to focus on benefits through nutrition and fitness balance. Weight Watchers encourages balance and teaches members that all foods can fit into their diet, but at a cost that’s often too high to continue. However, it is a beneficial educational tool for someone who wants to understand nutrition and exercise balance.

Jenny Craig diet. This is a calorie-controlled program with prepacked meals. Dieters can choose between two programs: in-center or at home. The first level involves adjusting to the program by eating small portions and the second level adds physical activity, while the third works on weight loss maintenance with varying plans. The program is easy to follow with the pre-portioned meals, but it can be difficult to adjust when eating out or cooking at home. Cost can also be too high for someone looking to lose weight, while also making it difficult to eat with family or loved ones.

Paleo diet. This is based on “modern foods that mimic the food groups of our preagricultural, hunter-gatherer, ancestors.” There are seven fundamental characteristics of hunter-gatherer diets to optimize health, minimize risk of chronic disease and lose weight. The diet advertises loose scientific claims and encourages avoidance of whole grains, which are proven to provide the body with key nutrients. This restrictive diet also suggests participants avoid dairy.

Whole30 Program. Dieters are encouraged to avoid sugar, grains, dairy and legumes. The program also states that it is not a diet, but it is designed to change a person’s life. It allows individuals to consume moderate portions of meat, seafood and eggs, as well as vegetables, fruit, natural fats, herbs, spices and seasonings. This is a restrictive method of eating that states food causes many medical conditions, when in reality most foods are essential to providing adequate and varied nutrients.

Nutrisystem. Prepackaged meals are prepared and delivered to participants. Each meal includes an outline of what to eat and when to eat it, while instructing dieters to avoid high-glycemic index foods and alcohol. The plan recommends three meals with two snacks and a dessert snack from the prepackaged options. The prepackaged meals help with portion-control for weight loss. However, Nutrisystem’s Turbo 10 plan provides inadequate calories to support a healthy brain and body functions. The cost of the program can also be a hindrance.

SlimFast diet. Dieters will follow a 1,200-calorie plan that allows individuals to prepare one 500-calorie meal a day, consume two meal replacements via a SlimFast bar or shake, and three snacks. The diet claims participants will lose one to two pounds a week. Unfortunately, because dieters have unique calorie needs for weight loss, an equal amount of food is not appropriate for two different people.

South Beach diet. This low-carbohydrate, high-protein and healthy-fat diet is advertised to help dieters lose eight to 13 pounds in two weeks—one to two pounds every week after. It uses the glycemic index to determine good and bad carbohydrates, encourages use of mono-unsaturated fats, and focuses on the benefits of fiber consumed through whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Phase one of the diet encourages inadequate carbohydrate intake, which is necessary for health and provides a person's brain with energy for optimal thinking. The diet also does not teach balance.

A healthy way for patients to lose weight is through participation in a National Diabetes Prevention Program lifestyle change programs. The AMA's Diabetes Prevention Guide supports physicians and health care organizations in defining and implementing evidence-based diabetes prevention strategies. This comprehensive and customized approach helps clinical practices and health care organizations identify patients with prediabetes and manage the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, including referring patients at risk to a National DPP lifestyle change program based on their individual needs.