



**DROPPED IT** Dieters lost weight on all of the plans we rated.

# Lose weight your way

9,000 readers rate 13 diet plans and tools

**IF YOU NEED** to drop a few pounds (or more than a few), there's a lot of good news in our survey of thousands of dieters and their experiences with a wide array of commercial and do-it-yourself weight-loss programs. We rated diets based on people's overall satisfaction with the programs. (They included vari-

ous versions of the same diet.) We also looked at the typical amount of weight our dieters said they lost. Here are some of the survey highlights:

**An app rules!** MyFitnessPal, a free smart-phone app and website, did better than any of the commercial diet plans, including Weight Watchers. It received a reader satisfaction score of 83 out of a possible 100.

**Go Stone Age.** The **Paleo Diet** is based on a book that instructs dieters to eat like a caveman, consuming lean meats, fish, seafood, fruit and non-starchy vegetables, and avoiding cereal grains, legumes, dairy products, and processed foods. Readers gave it a **high satisfaction score** of 80, a statistical tie with MyFitnessPal.

**Weight Watchers is the people's choice.** A whopping 43 percent of respon-

dents said they signed up for Weight Watchers. The second most popular plan, a generic low-carb (non-Atkins) diet, was chosen by 13 percent of respondents. Of the four commercial diets we rated, Weight Watchers got one of the top reader scores, 74, but it was in the middle of the pack of the 13 diets overall.

**Medifast losers lost big.** People using the low-calorie Medifast program lost more than those on other diets: 20 to 43 pounds for men and 14 to 40 pounds for women. They also had big weight-loss goals, hoping to lose an average of 47 pounds.

**Men shed more pounds than women.** Both men and women reported that they lost a similar percentage of their starting body weight. But men, who started off heavier, lost more pounds than women. So if you're competing with a spouse at dieting, look at percent of starting body weight lost, not pounds lost.

**Satisfaction depends on more than pounds lost.** Surprisingly, there was only a weak relationship between actual weight loss and subscribers' satisfaction with the various diets. Instead, they gave higher marks to the diets that helped them maintain their weight loss and prescribed lifestyle changes that were easy to make. It seems our dieters made a calculation about how much they were willing to sacrifice to lose weight. So low-cost, do-it-yourself diets typically received higher satisfaction scores than commercial diets.

**Significant weight loss is possible on all plans.** Almost 80 percent of the respondents who reported their starting and after-diet weight lost a significant number of pounds. The median loss was about 18 pounds for men and 15 pounds for women, which was enough to move many from obese to overweight or from overweight to a healthy weight. And they did it on all 13 diets. The diets were as varied as online and app programs and Jenny Craig, which offers a selection of commercial options that rely on branded meal replacements. People lost weight on diets such as Weight Watchers and MyFitnessPal that restrict the amounts but not the types of food you eat. They also lost weight on diets such as Paleo and Atkins that do the opposite.

The lesson from these findings is that "there's not one single solution to losing weight," says Chris N. Sciamanna, M.D., M.P.H., professor of medicine at Penn State College of Medicine and a consultant on this project. "People get bored. These

## Inside

**How much did readers lose?**

Page 27

**Psychologists weigh in**

Page 28

**How we rated diets**

Page 29

**Treadmills & ellipticals Ratings**

Pages 32-33

**Infomercial exercisers**

Page 34

results give you an idea of how many opportunities there are to mix it up.”

The best strategy for would-be dieters may be to select a diet based on your personal preference. “What works for one person is not necessarily going to work for someone else,” says Alice H. Lichtenstein, D.Sc., director of the Cardiovascular Nutrition Laboratory at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University. “If the first try doesn’t work, don’t give up. Just try something else.”

The survey asked CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers about diets they had been on in the past three years. Readers had freely chosen these diets themselves, and they reported substantial weight loss. It’s possible that respondents who didn’t do well at weight loss declined to answer that section of the survey. Also, subscribers are older and wealthier than the average American, so their results may not be typical of the U.S. population. And our respondents had a lot of weight to lose. When they started their diets, 65 percent of men and 61 percent of women were obese.

How can you tell which of the diets has the best chance of working for you? Read on for some clues that we gleaned from our survey.

### Keeping track helps

“Everyone should try using self-monitoring, by tracking calories eaten and physical activity,” Sciamanna says. “It really works. It’s a pillar of behavioral science. The more you monitor, the smarter you get about your food and exercise habits.”

Keeping a food diary used to involve toting around a calorie guide and a notepad. Today you can do it all online or on your smart phone with trackers that draw on huge databases of foods and meals.

MyFitnessPal is a smart-phone app and website that sync automatically. It enables you to keep a diary of your weight, what you ate, and how much you exercised, complete with useful features such as a bar-code scanner and the ability to save and retrieve meals and dishes that you eat frequently.

Eighty-seven percent of those who relied on MyFitnessPal said they used it to record what they ate, as did 81 percent of readers who used SparkPeople, another website-and-app product. And so did 68 percent of those on Weight Watchers, which offers paid-up members weight, food, and exercise trackers on its website and through an

app. Unsurprisingly, respondents gave those three diets the top marks on calorie awareness.

A survey respondent who lost more than 40 pounds using MyFitnessPal said the nutritionist he consulted “gave me a

## Losing 5 to 10 percent of your weight can yield health benefits.

bunch of paperwork to log my daily intake. Using an app on the phone seemed like a smarter/easier way to do it. It worked for me. No tricks or silver bullets—just discipline.”

### Adjust your expectations

Although readers who finished their diets lost weight, they had hoped to lose even more. Weight Watchers dieters were fairly typical in this regard: Respondents wanted to lose an average of 40 pounds, but only 13

percent succeeded in getting within 5 pounds of their goal weight. Falling short of expectations clearly disappointed our readers. Those who reached their goal weight were much more satisfied with their diets than those who didn’t.

Our medical consultants say that dieters often overestimate how much weight they can realistically lose, perhaps not realizing that dropping as little as 5 to 10 percent of starting weight can pay real health dividends.

And in that our readers were successful. Almost 45 percent of respondents lost 10 percent or more of their starting body weight. In other words: Lighten up about lightening up.

### Define your eating style

Some diets on our list are built around eliminating or severely restricting major categories of food. Those include the Atkins Diet, the Paleo Diet, the initial stages of the South Beach Diet, and the catchall category of generic “low-carb diet.” Of those, the **Paleo Diet was the best-liked, with reader satisfaction scores**

## How much weight did readers lose?

We found that even respondents on the same diet had very different weight-loss experiences.

Starting weight seems to affect the amount of pounds dieters can expect to lose. For example, the men in our survey, who on average started out with higher body mass, lost more pounds than the women did. Another possible reason for variation is that some dieters stayed on their plan longer than others. Faulty recall

and reluctance to report on weight loss may also factor into those results.

Because dieters had such varying experiences, we present the typical range of weight lost for men and women for each diet. The small percentage who gained weight were excluded. The diets are listed in alphabetical order, within plan types. We also show the median number of months that readers reported being on each diet.

	Median months on diet	Typical weight loss in pounds	
		ALL	MEN
<b>COMMERCIAL DIETS</b>			
Jenny Craig	9	15 to 34	10 to 30
Medifast	6	20 to 43	14 to 40
Nutrisystem	5	10 to 30	7 to 24
Weight Watchers	9	12 to 35	10 to 28
<b>DO-IT-YOURSELF PLANS</b>			
Atkins Diet	7	15 to 30	8 to 25
Glycemic Index Diet	9	11 to 29	10 to 27
Low-carb diet (other than Atkins)	8	13 to 35	10 to 29
Mediterranean Diet	-	10 to 25	7 to 25
MyFitnessPal	5	10 to 30	4 to 18
Paleo Diet	7	10 to 32	6 to 20
Slim-Fast	6	10 to 25	5 to 22
South Beach Diet	5	11 to 27	8 to 23
SparkPeople	-	10 to 25	5 to 21

A dash (-) indicates insufficient data.

significantly higher than for the others. But readers gave all of them relatively low scores when it came to dietary variety and the inclusion of favorite foods.

But to some, the restrictiveness is what makes these diets appealing. “The low-carb diets are often restricted in quality, but not quantity,” Sciamanna says. “If you remove white flour and sugar, the core of what people overeat, it’s really a shortcut on how to eat well.”

By contrast, Weight Watchers, MyFitnessPal, and SparkPeople got high reader scores for dietary variety. That’s not surprising because you can use those diets and tools without having to buy branded food products.

“We don’t believe it’s practical for people to follow rigid diet recommendations long-term,” says Mike Lee, co-founder of MyFitnessPal. “If you want to have a glass of wine at dinner, you can eat a lighter lunch or go for a run. It’s up to you to spend that calorie budget.”

There is medical consensus that weight loss can be done safely if calorie intake is reduced enough to achieve an average 1-to-3-pound weight loss per week. “Although weight loss is safe for most healthy individuals, everyone reacts differently, and if you have special problems like diabetes or heart disease, it’s a good idea to consult with your doctor,” says Sachiko St. Jeor,

R.D., Ph.D., professor emeritus of internal medicine at the University of Nevada School of Medicine, a consultant on this project. “If you lose weight too fast, you may have unexpected medical complications. And for diets below 1,000 calories a day, you need to take precautions to avoid nutrient inadequacies.”

### To cook or not to cook?

Three of the commercial diets in our Ratings—Jenny Craig, Medifast, and Nutrisystem—are built around membership and the use of branded, packaged,

## Prefab meal plans can be a good choice for dieters who don’t cook.

portion-controlled meals and foods such as bars and shakes. Those foods are supplemented by your own groceries, including fresh fruits and vegetables.

Readers on Medifast, Jenny Craig, or Nutrisystem were significantly more likely to report that they relied exclusively on products and advice from their plan while dieting. Slim-Fast also uses meal replacements but isn’t in this category.

That’s because as a group our Slim-Fast dieters took a more do-it-yourself approach, integrating advice or products from other diet plans.

The commercial meal-replacement diets got middle-of-the-road marks or lower for food variety. But a significant minority of dieters—17 percent on Jenny Craig, 23 percent on Medifast, and 38 percent on Nutrisystem—didn’t like the taste of the prefab foods. And about one in five of the dieters on those plans said that the cost was higher than they had been led to believe. In the first three months on the plans, Jenny Craig clients spent a median of \$809, Medifast dieters \$677, and Nutrisystem customers \$582.

Still, our consultants say, those diets may be a good choice for the growing number of Americans who rarely cook, whether out of lack of interest and knowledge or because they’re too busy. “Cooking feels incredibly labor-intensive for a lot of people,” Sciamanna says.

A survey respondent on the South Beach Diet told us that although she liked not having to “buy specific foods sold by South Beach Diet,” in the end she felt that she “spent most of my time shopping, prepping veggies, cooking, making lunches.”

By contrast, a satisfied Jenny Craig customer liked how “delicious pre-packaged

## Overeating: Psychologists weigh in

The idea that negative emotions can trigger overeating is so embedded in our culture that it has spawned its own visual cliché: the heroine of the chick flick who has endured a romantic disappointment sitting in bed and spooning ice cream straight from the carton.

The cliché reflects a real problem. Respondents to our diet survey said they had less success keeping weight off if their diet plan didn’t address the emotional triggers to overeating.

It turns out that psychologists couldn’t agree more. As a companion to our survey of dieters, we worked with the American Psychological Association to survey 1,328 licensed psychologists on how they dealt with patients’ weight and weight-loss challenges in their practice. And they repeatedly identified emotional factors as not only an important factor in clients’ weight problems but also the major barrier to overcoming them.

Asked what they found helpful, seven

of 10 psychologists who worked with patients on their weight problems identified these three strategies as “excellent” or “good”:

- Cognitive therapy, which helps people identify and correct dysfunctional thoughts that lead to unhelpful emotions and behaviors. For example, someone who eats a cookie at a party might blame it on a lack of willpower, conclude she’ll never get the weight off, then proceed to eat more cookies. Cognitive therapy would teach the person to think of the cookie as a one-time-only slip-up, because everybody makes mistakes.
- Problem-solving aimed at overcoming barriers to weight loss. A patient who says he’s too tired after work to go to the gym might consider, with the therapist’s help, alternatives such as a run or walk at lunchtime or working out in the morning or on weekends.
- Mindfulness training, an approach that trains people to allow negative thoughts and emotions to come and go without dwelling on them, and instead concentrate on living and enjoying the moment.



Many of the psychologists said they collaborated with other professionals to help clients with weight problems. Though primary-care physicians were the most common partner cited, the psychologists found that colleagues specializing in weight issues, nutritionists, and registered dietitians—were the most helpful in addressing weight issues.

foods made mealtime mindless,” even though the cost was “more expensive than it should be.”

## Prioritize lifestyle changes

“If somebody’s going to make a permanent change in their body weight, they most likely will need to make fundamental changes in their dietary and lifestyle patterns,” says Lichtenstein at Tufts.

Our respondents apparently agree. Those who said their diet had lifestyle changes that were easy to incorporate into their daily lives were more likely to be satisfied than those who didn’t. On that factor, MyFitnessPal particularly excelled. Respondents were also more satisfied with diets that taught them general self-control strategies.

We also asked about whether the diets encouraged specific positive lifestyle changes. For encouraging them to eat more fruits and vegetables, respondents gave top marks to Weight Watchers, the Paleo Diet, the Mediterranean Diet, and the Glycemic Index Diet. Weight Watchers and SparkPeople got the highest scores for encouraging exercise.

## Get the most out of Weight Watchers

We did a deeper dive into the survey results for Weight Watchers because so many of our respondents used it. About two-thirds said they attended the in-person group meetings, which can be supplemented with Weight Watchers online tools. The others followed the diet online only.

Judging from what they told us, if you want to get the most out of your Weight Watchers membership, you’d be well advised to get yourself to the meetings. Readers who did had slightly higher overall satisfaction scores. And a much higher percentage who went to the meetings reported that Weight Watchers had taught them self-control strategies. Plus, the meeting-goers also lost more weight than readers who followed the diet online.

Sciamanna says those results make sense: “When you go to a group, you get accountability to another human being and the belief that change is possible, because when you look around, you see that somebody is doing well. I think face-to-face programs are never going to go away because they’re probably always going to do better. I’d be shocked if it were otherwise. We’re social beings.”

## How we rated the diets

This year’s diet Ratings are based on a survey of 9,376 subscribers, which was one panel of the 2012 Annual Questionnaire by the Consumer Reports National Research Center.

After consulting a wide range of internal and external experts, we decided to invest in this survey, one of the largest ever done on specific diets, because we believed it could get to the heart of what people care most about when choosing a diet.

In the past we based our Ratings on an analysis of clinical trials and nutrition. This year’s Ratings include the much broader range of the popular diets that our subscribers reported using, including some that have not to our knowledge been clinically studied.

The Ratings here are directly relevant

to real-life diet decisions made by our readers. Respondents freely chose the diet they used and decided for themselves how long to stay on it. They had to rely on their own motivation or seek a boost from meetings or counseling, but they did not benefit from the many means (such as frequent reminders and free food) used to keep participants in clinical trials until the very end of a study.

Personal preferences and needs vary greatly, and these Ratings are designed to help you find a diet plan, or combination of methods, that will give you the results you seek. For example, if the plan you prefer rates poorly in some area, such as encouraging exercise, you may want to add an app or other means to achieve that end.

## Survey Diets

In order of reader score, within types.

	Reader score	Initial weight loss	Maintenance	Calorie awareness	Food variety	Fruits & vegetables	Exercise
<b>COMMERCIAL PLANS</b>							
<b>Weight Watchers</b> PointsPlus food quota and support at meetings or online	74	○	○	●	●	●	●
<b>Medifast</b> Low-calorie meal replacements	70	●	○	○	●	●	●
<b>Jenny Craig</b> Branded meal replacements and personal consultation	66	○	●	○	○	○	○
<b>Nutrisystem</b> Branded meal replacements and online tools	56	●	●	○	○	○	●
<b>DO-IT-YOURSELF PLANS</b>							
<b>MyFitnessPal</b> Food and exercise diary, online and with an app	83	○	●	●	●	●	●
<b>Paleo Diet</b> Lean meats, fish, seafood, fruit and non-starchy vegetables	80	●	●	●	●	●	○
<b>Mediterranean Diet</b> More plant-based meals and olive oil; limit dairy, red meat, refined carbs	77	○	●	○	○	●	○
<b>SparkPeople</b> App and online exercise and food tracker, plus menu plans	76	○	-	●	●	○	●
<b>South Beach Diet</b> Healthy fats, fruits and veggies, “good” carbs	72	○	○	●	○	○	●
<b>Glycemic Index Diet</b> Foods that don’t make your blood sugar spike	71	○	○	○	○	●	○
<b>Low-carb diet</b> (other than Atkins) General carb restriction	71	○	○	○	●	○	○
<b>Atkins Diet</b> Severe carb restriction to start, slight relaxation later	70	○	○	●	●	●	●
<b>Slim-Fast</b> Branded shakes, snacks, and bars, plus some regular food	60	●	●	●	●	●	●

A dash (-) indicates insufficient data.

## Guide to the survey

Ratings based on responses from 9,376 subscribers who were on a version of these diets at some point in the past three years. Subscribers are not representative of the U.S. population. **Reader score** reflects mean score for overall satisfaction with the diet plan (including cost, ease of use, and weight loss). A score of 100 would mean all respondents were “completely satisfied”; 80, “very satisfied”; 60, “fairly well satisfied”; and 40, “somewhat dissatisfied” on average. Differences of fewer than 6 points are not meaningful. Survey results are relative, and Ratings for commercial and do-it-yourself plans are directly comparable. **Do-it-yourself plans** are based on books, apps, or general diet concepts that consumers follow on their own. **Commercial plans** have a set cost, typically a fee for membership and/or the required purchase of branded foods. Although Slim-Fast sells meal replacements, we classified it as a noncommercial diet; our survey found that most people use its branded items informally with other diet strategies. **Initial weight loss** and **maintenance** scores reflect how satisfied readers were with those aspects of the plan. **Maintenance** refers to how helpful the plan was in keeping off weight. **Fruits & vegetables**, **calorie awareness**, and **exercise** scores reflect how well readers thought the plan encouraged those positive behaviors. **Food variety** reflects whether plan allowed sufficient variety and included favorite foods.