

# why do smart girls go on dumb diets?

Experts explain how “get thin quick” scams rope in women.



**Australia is a nation of smart women. More girls than guys have bachelor degrees (making it a somewhat ironically titled qualification!), and 55 per cent of tertiary students are women. Yet, in this land of great female intellectual power, sales of not-smart-at-all diet products are booming – to the value of \$700 million each year. And women are the ones doing the spending.**

Any eating regimen that deprives your brain and body of adequate fuel can be classed as a dumb diet. Also referred to as crash diets, these programs promise big weight loss in a short amount of time (around 10 days) and usually take one of the following forms: 1) Only one food group is allowed (eg grapefruit, cabbage soup); 2) Entire food groups are banned (eg no carbs); or 3) Only powders and potions are used (these are often sold in kit form at chemists and health stores).

Jess, 29, put her marketing executive job in jeopardy during a no-carb diet. “I was eating a banana and drinking green tea in the morning, then having nothing else for the rest of the day. I felt lethargic, couldn’t concentrate, and was so short-tempered. I wasn’t myself at all. I stopped five days in after my boss commented on my poor performance.”

Meg, a 25-year-old training manager, recently did a detox diet and actually gained three kilos. “I paid \$100 for a kit, which specified that I was only allowed to drink syrup and lemon mixed with water for 14 days. No food. By day three, I had a splitting headache, and was too weak to be effective at work or do any exercise.” Meg caved in 24 hours later and ended up pigging out on a load of fast food.

So why do bright, educated women continue to buy into these ridiculous programs? Dr Jenny O’Dea, dietitian and associate professor in nutrition and health education at the University of Sydney, says that most crash diets do make you lose weight initially, however, none of it is fat – it’s all stuff your body actually needs for healthy functioning, like water, muscle and glycogen (a complex carbohydrate molecule that the body uses for fuel). The weight you see

**“smart women fall prey to dangerous diets because of slick marketing campaigns.”**

disappear will make a return as soon as you ingest a normal, balanced meal.

“People get a big psychological thrill when they get on the scales and see they’ve lost weight on these restrictive programs,” says O’Dea. “But you need to understand that the weight loss is not fat. To lose fat you need to eat sensibly and exercise for several months, without the binge that usually follows a diet.” She adds that diet products, like pills and shakes, generally contain stimulants, like caffeine and guarana, which give an artificial buzz and can be addictive.

Louise Adams, a clinical psychologist who specialises in body image issues, believes that smart women fall prey to dangerous diets because of slick

marketing campaigns. “[Diet companies] will often pay a doctor or pharmacist to endorse a crash diet with a quasi-scientific-sounding explanation, and get a celebrity to promote it to add some glamour,” she says. Using health professionals in endorsements like this makes it hard to decipher what’s legitimate, and what is a money-spinning exercise. “Crash-diet companies actually bank their business models on repeat customers. I personally think that these programs should come with a health warning, like cigarette packets.”

## the side effects.

“On a crash diet, you go into an unsustainable state called ‘ketosis’, which is where you start to burn muscle,” explains O’Dea. “When you’re in this imbalanced metabolic state, you get acetone breath, which smells like nail polish remover.” Resulting symptoms include nausea, weakness, fatigue, and plummeting blood sugar levels, which leaves nothing for your brain and muscles to readily burn.



## smart diets for smart women.

So, what’s the smartest diet out there? No diet at all – just a long-term balanced lifestyle, with healthy, fresh food and exercise.

“If you want to lose weight, you’ve got to induce a kilojoule deficit [using more energy than you ingest], and I think the easiest way to do this is to exercise. The more muscle you have, the more energy you burn. Building muscle in the legs is particularly beneficial, since you use them all the time,”

explains O’Dea. Adams teaches her clients to eat mindfully rather than scoffing down guiltily. “I get them to pay attention to the act of eating; to smell the food, taste the food, enjoy the experience and tune into it,” she says.

When asked what she thinks of a diet claiming, “You’ll drop two dress sizes in two weeks”, Josephine Rogers, former chief dietitian at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital

in Sydney, says, “Why don’t you just go and buy a new dress?”

O’Dea agrees. “A lot of women simply don’t need to lose weight. Their bodies are simply saying to them, ‘I’m a size 14, that’s how I’m made, so please buy a new dress rather than put me on a mad eating scheme,’” she says.

“I think the smartest girls are the ones whose self-worth comes from the quality of their relationships, rather than from how they look.” □