

# THE POLITICS OF **DIETING**

With deep pockets and relentless marketing schemes, the diet industry is consumed with capitalizing on our country's obsession with weight loss—yet America remains a worldwide leader in obesity. **Marla Rose** explores the convoluted truth behind dieting, and weighs in on how to break free of its stranglehold.

# I am a female in the Western world.

With just those two broad demographic facts provided, we know that it is statistically very likely that I have been on a diet in my lifetime. Like the estimated 90 percent of women in the US who, at one point or another, struggle with losing unwanted pounds, I have lost and regained weight too many times to count. Each time I have started a new diet, I've clung to a hope that this would be the time I would finally keep the weight off—a hope that was quickly and predictably dashed.

The very first diet I went on was in the spring before I graduated middle school. I bought a pocket-sized calorie counter and logged everything I ate in the spiral notebook that always accompanied me. Each morning, my new goal was to consume fewer calories than the day before. As is the case for so many of us, it wasn't long before my simple experiment in weight loss took on a life of its own, spinning dangerously out of control.

What I learned years later was that I was the perfect prey for the weight-loss industry, which was hungry for impressionable young women to eat up its manipulative marketing ploys. They told me what I wanted to hear, and I fell for it.

What I didn't understand was that there was an entire market banking on my struggle. An industry that held my allegiance was relying on my willful ignorance to continue to

circle back around after I regained those dastardly pounds, and start the vicious cycle all over again.

## Under pressure

Though my experience was three decades ago, a churning cloud of dietary advice and pervasive social pressure continues to swirl around us. And with the immediacy and interconnectivity of the internet, dietary rhetoric and advice is available 24 hours a day. Our world dictates that young people be exposed to an intrusive and clamorous barrage of opinions on Facebook, clandestine celebrity brand endorsements on Instagram, and daily reminders in magazines of how they fail to measure up to the physical ideal reflected back at them.

Under the weight of this thin-centric messaging, it's no

wonder so many are lured into the sticky web of the dieting industry. The US spends an estimated \$55 billion annually on losing weight—a figure that includes everything from books to bariatric surgeries, weight-loss centers to supplements. This industry thrives off the 45 million Americans on a diet—focusing its messaging on females, who make up the bulk of those who invest in weight-reduction efforts.

Despite the overwhelming popularity and staggering amount of money spent on diets, the results are repeatedly disappointing. Up to 97 percent of dieters fail in keeping the weight off, and only 20 percent will maintain the loss for a year. A 2007 University of California Los Angeles meta-analysis of more than 30 long-term obesity studies found that the vast majority of dieters had regained all their weight. Within five years, 50 percent of those studied had, in fact, regained even more than they had originally lost.

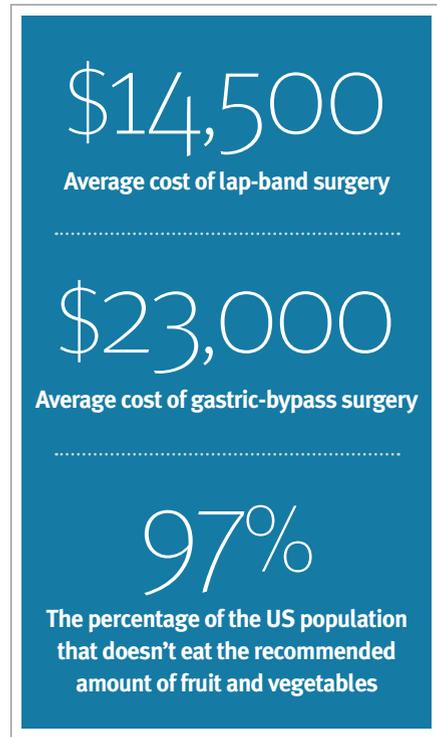
In other words, the dreaded cycle of weight loss and gain is a common result of dieting itself. The cumulative effect of that pattern is linked to heart disease, high blood pressure, inflammation, and—you guessed it—long-term weight gain. Yet this merry-go-round is a theme in so many of our lives.

### Tipping the scales

How did we become so overweight in the first place? In a country where nearly two-thirds of adults are considered overweight or obese, the irony is astounding: while we spend billions each year on trying to slim down, the United States continues to be among the countries leading the charge with obesity. Why is this?

Although we ultimately choose

what we put into our bodies, there are many other factors at play which impact what we consume. Multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns, the evolution of food technology, and lobbying efforts have all reinforced a processed, packaged, and nutritionally insufficient diet. The



industry relies heavily on the combined influence of money and messaging to convince consumers of its waist-whittling powers, yet most consumers are unaware of the authority the dieting industry carries when it comes to our everyday food choices.

Weight Watchers, the top contender in the battle of the diet-industry giants, spent \$65 million on marketing alone

during the first half of 2015. The company also has a secret weapon: a mega-celebrity endorsement from Oprah Winfrey. In October of 2015, Weight Watchers sold a 10-percent stake to Winfrey for \$43 million, in hopes of enlisting the mogul's empire with its marketing. Meanwhile, the slightly smaller Nutrisystem spent \$48 million to promote the weight-reducing forces of its boxed meals. The investment paid off: Nutrisystem reported revenue of \$137 million in the first quarter of 2015. Clearly, the hungry consumer is falling into the million-dollar money trap strategically placed by the reigning diet lords.

For desperate dieters, it is the targeted messaging that lures them in. The alluring promise of quick and convenient weight loss requiring minimal effort is undeniably seductive. In January 2016, Winfrey tweeted a video claiming that she eats bread and still managed to lose 26 pounds with Weight Watchers, adding the hashtag #comejoinme. That tweet and video went viral, and Weight Watchers' stock quickly spiked 20 percent. Along with celebrity endorsements, diet companies appeal to the irresistible pull of instant gratification. Weight Watchers guarantees a minimum weight loss of 10 pounds in the first two months "or your money back." Not to be outdone, Nutrisystem peddles its Turbo10 plan, promising a 10-pound weight loss in just one month. Of course, many fail to read the fine print, stating that typical results are based on "a balanced and healthy lifestyle," and are therefore not a magic bullet. Perhaps money cannot

## Dieting Throughout History

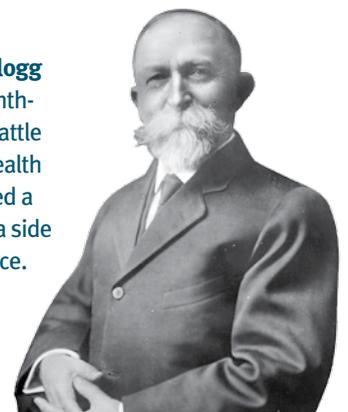
Our obsession with weight loss might have hit an all-time high in recent decades, but dieting to lose pounds goes back as early as the 19th century.

### 1860s

This decade marked the release of the **first high-protein, low-carb** diet plan, William Banting's "Letter on Corpulence, Addressed to the Public."

### 1870s

**Dr. John Harvey Kellogg** took over the Seventh-day Adventist-run Battle Creek Sanitarium health resort and espoused a vegetarian diet with a side of sexual abstinence.



buy actual results, but it can certainly buy attention, and—like any successful marketing campaign—that is the key ingredient the diet industry needs to wield its unprecedented power.

The private sector is not the only entity influenced by the diet industry. The USDA’s own Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which sets the standards for thousands of our national and regional public health policies, has been heavily swayed by food and beverage corporations. In 2015, the Center for Responsive Politics—a free, online database that tracks the money and lobbying efforts of American elections and public policy—reported that the USDA documented 696 financial donors. Among other food-industry heavyweights, contributors included the National Milk Producers Federation, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Kraft, and Nestle. So even if a dieter chooses to reject the mass-marketed weight-loss plans in favor of following the USDA’s recommendations, they would still be led astray due to the omnipotent pressure of the food and diet industry.

That pressure takes on many shapes. Last October, a federal court dismissed a lawsuit filed by vegan medical group Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) against the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC)—a group of (presumably) unbiased health professionals who gather every five years to create the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The suit, brought on after PCRM obtained documents through the Freedom of Information Act, alleged that the DGAC was unduly influenced by the egg

industry in the form of industry-backed studies. The suit also claimed that the DGAC was influenced by the appointment of several committee members from institutions funded by the egg industry in an effort to remove the recommended limits on cholesterol consumption—as reflected in the current guidelines. The court ruled that PCRM’s claims were “non-justiciable,” stating that there are no



rules for limiting the amount of industry influence the DGAC can accept. The dietary guidelines are intended to serve public health projects such as the creation of food policies—including school lunch programs. Even reputable media outlets will use the dietary guidelines as their go-to source for health-related stories. This was the case when *Time* recently published a feature urging readers to abstain from consuming egg whites and to instead consume egg yolks, using the

new guidelines as proof positive that cholesterol is no longer a concern to the American public.

To further illustrate the entanglement, the USDA’s mention of “protein foods” cites evidence showing that a lower intake of meat and processed poultry is associated with reduced risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and some types of cancer in adults. Dozens of studies have also backed the idea that eliminating meat can lead to weight loss. One such study, published in 2015 by the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, found that those who committed to a vegetarian or vegan diet lost an average of 10 pounds in one month.

However, despite the overwhelming evidence against meat consumption, the guidelines do not advise eating less meat—let alone eliminating it altogether. Rather, they assure citizens that meat can be consumed as long as one limits other sources of fat and sodium. The combined 2015 expenditures contributed to the government organization by the National Pork Producer’s Council (\$780,000), the North American Meat Institute (\$220,000), and the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (\$112,000) certainly had some say in the matter.

### Plant-based prevention

Americans need a resource they can trust. Undeniably frustrated by the broken promises of the weight-loss industry, more and more are taking matters into their own hands. According to Marissa Gilbert, an analyst from market-research agency Mintel, popular diet-food programs are undergoing a financial downturn: Lean Cuisine, Jenny Craig, and

### 1900s

Fletcherism became all the rage when art dealer Horace Fletcher recommended **chewing one’s food until it became liquefied** and then spitting out what remained.

### 1910s

The first calorie counter was introduced and distributed with Lulu Hunt Peters’ best-selling book, *Diet and Health With Key to the Calories*.



### 1920s

In an advertising campaign from **Lucky Strike** cigarettes targeting women, magazine readers were told to “Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet.”

Weight Watchers have all experienced diminishing revenues in recent years due to the emerging renaissance of the whole-foods diet. Lean Cuisine, for example, experienced a dramatic 15-percent plummet in sales in just one year. Diet pills have also seen a similar decline—about a 20-percent drop in sales. With the decreased interest in the more “traditional” diet brands and plans, our nation may be slowly inching its way toward a more holistic path to losing weight. Instead of counting “points,” the emerging trend is centered around overall health, and focusing on consuming nutritious foods that actually fuel our bodies.

Thanks to recent scientific research supporting a whole, plant-based diet, the evidence backing this shift toward holistic health is mounting. Sparked by *The China Study*—a groundbreaking review of the relationship between diet, disease, and the consumption of animal products—a number of medical studies have followed suit, ultimately pointing to the benefits of unprocessed plant foods, and the many health-related reasons to give up meat, milk, and eggs.

For proof, look no further than our nation’s best-selling books on health. In recent years, many medical doctors have become vocal advocates of a plant-based lifestyle as a means to attaining optimal health, publishing a multitude of best-sellers, including Michael Greger, MD’s *How Not to Die*, Neal Barnard, MD’s *21-Day Weight Loss Kickstart*, and Joel Fuhrman, MD’s *Eat to Live*. Although there are some variations among these professionals’ perspectives (low-oil versus oil-free, emphasis on “superfoods,” carbs or no

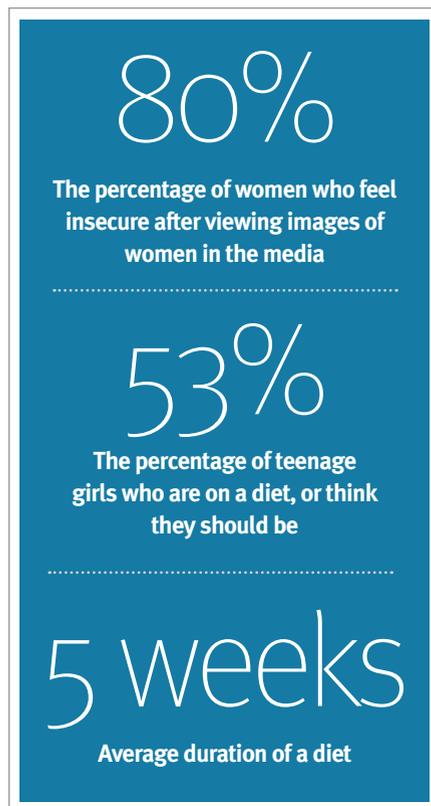
carbs, etc.), the common denominator is that the processed meat- and dairy-laden Standard American Diet is both a hindrance to long-term weight loss and a detriment to our overall health.

“A whole-foods, plant-based eating pattern is an ideal dietary strategy to get

all the while reaping numerous other health benefits,” McMacken says. “Moreover, plant-based diets have broader ethical and environmental benefits that naturally help keep many people motivated.”

With the support of these and other influential physicians, veganism has gained traction and credibility in the health world. Even mainstream media outlets are beginning to discuss the importance of getting back to basics and embracing whole foods. PCRM, whose network includes more than 12,000 doctors working to promote plant-based diets as preventative medicine, asserts, “When you build your meals from a generous array of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and beans—that is, healthy vegetarian choices—weight loss is remarkably easy.” For some, this is exactly the call to action and boost of confidence needed to trade in low-carb, low-fat, “all-natural” frozen meals for a baked sweet potato.

But for those stuck on the dieting loop-de-loop and seeking another answer, it’s important to keep in mind that veganism is not necessarily a prescription for weight loss. “The causes of obesity are complex,” explains McMacken, “and include diet, genetics, mood, sleep, medications, and our environment.” Though weight loss varies by individual, and veganism is by no means a cure-all, when it comes to optimizing our well-being, embracing a whole-foods-based vegan diet is an investment in our long-term health. “Reversing obesity requires a multi-pronged approach,” McMacken continues. “But from the dietary perspective, a plant-based diet optimizes our chances



off of the roller coaster and manage weight long-term,” says Michelle McMacken, MD, Assistant Professor of Medicine at NYU School of Medicine, and Director of the Bellevue Hospital Weight Management Clinic. “Studies show that people can lose weight on a plant-based diet without measuring portions or counting calories,



### 1930s

This decade marked the introduction of the **Grapefruit Diet**, a low-calorie plan that called for a grapefruit with every meal. The same concept was revived in the 1950s as the Hollywood Diet.

### 1960s

*The Drinking Man’s Diet*, a best-selling pamphlet written by Robert Cameron in 1964, was another spin on the **high-protein, low-starch diet**—recommending copious meat consumption along with low amounts of carbohydrates and ample spirits.

### 1970s

The Sleeping Beauty Diet recommended getting lots of sleep (to stave off opportunities to eat), **best achieved through sedatives**.





of achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, while also improving many other health risks.”

The beauty of moving toward a vegan diet lies in the flexibility it offers, as opposed to the rigidity espoused within the pervasive dieting culture. Consumers are no longer tied to pre-packaged meals, day-in and day-out. Veganism is filled with abundance, variation, and an almost infinite variety of health-promoting vegetables, fruit, beans, grains, nuts, and seeds.

There is hope that this recent trend toward plant-based eating will continue to grow. Like any movement that questions

not what will result in weight loss. I am figuring out what will help me to feel optimally healthy, but also forgiving myself when I don't adhere strictly to that. Slowly but intentionally, my priority has shifted to taking care of myself—getting sunshine and exercise every day, laughing with my family, staying hydrated, having hobbies, and making sure that the plant-based foods I choose to eat are nourishing and delicious. I'm as uninterested in contributing to the deep pockets of the dieting industry as I am in contributing to the antiquated belief system that I am not whole if I am not stick-thin.

I wish I could tell the 14-year-old

“A plant-based diet optimizes our chances of achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, while also improving many other health risks.”

assumptions and breaks away from corporate greed, this will not happen overnight—but in time, perhaps we will see our society focus on long-term, plant-based prevention, rather than brief bursts of sensationalist rhetoric inspired by the latest fad diet. By making food choices with an eye toward the wholesome, we can in turn feel more wholesome ourselves.

At nearly 50, I can't claim that the pressure to be a certain size no longer matters to me, but I can say with confidence that it matters less and less with each successive year. Perhaps this is one of the real gifts of aging. Today, I am asking what will best nourish me—

version of me, hunched over her notebook and scrutinizing every calorie, that her brain deserved more worthwhile subjects, and her time was better spent nurturing her self-esteem. I can't take back the past though, so I will live this way today. Realizing that I have the power to break free from the dieting industry may be a lot to digest, but these days, I'm hungry for what's best. **VN**

**Marla Rose** (*veganstreetmedia.com*) is a writer, event planner, activist, and mother based in the Chicago area. Additional research was provided by **Tanya Flink**—a passionate vegan, fervent foodie, and certified Master Personal Trainer based in Orange County, CA.

## Weighty Matters

When it comes to evaluating obesity, how accurate is our BMI?

To complicate the many factors contributing to America's obesity epidemic, there is also the question of how obesity is calculated in the first place. To illustrate the contentious nature of the conversation around size, we need to look no further than the Body Mass Index, or BMI. Developed by a mathematician in the mid-19th century, BMI is hotly debated and, to many, considered an imprecise and outdated tool in the medical community.

BMI is a value derived from a calculation based on the weight and height of an individual, and classifications of “normal,” “overweight,” and “obese” are then determined by the score. When criteria for “overweight” and “obese” were lowered in 1998, 25 million people in the US went to bed in the “normal” category and awoke the next morning in the “overweight” category. The change in determining the criteria for who was considered “overweight” was spearheaded by the National Institutes of Health, a result of their linking extra weight to health problems.

### 1980s

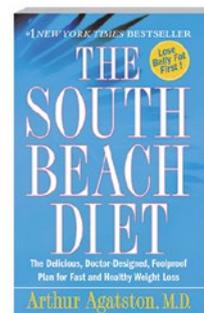
The Beverly Hills Diet was **all about food combining**—focusing on which particular foods should be eaten in conjunction with other foods—in order to reach one's ideal size.

### 1990s

The **high-protein, low-carb fad** was revived as the Atkins Diet. Pork rinds became a health food and meat was served with a side of meat and some parsley sprigs.

### 2000s

White foods—such as potatoes, flour, and sugar—were restricted on another fad weight-loss plan, the **South Beach Diet**.



### 2010s

The **high-protein Paleo diet**, embraced by many Crossfit enthusiasts, is based on circumstantial evidence from the diets of early humans.