The American Heart Association Declares War on Fad Diets

Every year, especially in the spring months preceding “bathing suit” season, an assortment of unhealthy, nutritionally unbalanced fad diets begin to circulate across the United States. All the diets promise one thing - quick weight loss.

Why “declare war”?
To inform the public about misleading weight loss claims. Many of the fad diets in circulation -- like last year’s infamous cabbage soup diet -- can undermine people's health, cause physical discomfort, and lead to disappointment when people regain their weight soon after they lose it.

To set the record straight about the American Heart Association's eating plan for healthy adults. Many of these diets falsely claim to be endorsed by or authored by the American Heart Association.

The public should be informed that the real American Heart Association eating plan gives recommended servings per day of various food categories, not of specific foods. The real American Heart Association eating plan recommends that healthy Americans get no more than 30 percent of their total calories each day from fat, and also recommends eating five or more servings of fruit and vegetables each and every day.

Any diet that gives specific menus or suggests that the diet be followed for a set period of time is not from the American Heart Association. The real American Heart Association diet has been carefully researched and is intended for a lifetime of use. Most important, the real American Heart Association eating plan accommodates the needs of people with diverse food preferences.

Fad diets are flawed in other important ways. Most do not encourage physical activity -- for example walking 30 minutes most days of the week -- which is helpful for maintaining weight loss over a long period. Lack of physical activity is also a major risk factor for heart disease.

In addition, many fad diets are based on “food folklore,” some dating back to the early 19th century. Diets high in protein, for example, are also usually higher in fat and could have serious health risks -- like raising cholesterol levels -- if undertaken over a long time. Ideas about “fat burning foods” and “food combining” are also classified by the American Heart Association as unsubstantiated myths.

Appetite suppressants are not recommended for people who are only mildly overweight unless they have health problems that are made worse by their weight. These medications should not be used only to improve appearance because they may cause a life-threatening disease - primary pulmonary hypertension. Primary pulmonary hypertension affects the blood vessels in the lungs and results in death within four years in 45 percent of its victims. There is no way to determine who is at risk of developing this problem.
Approximately 35 percent of the United States population is overweight -- and among African-American women that number is closer to 50 percent. Overweight people are more likely to develop heart disease and stroke even in the absence of other cardiovascular disease risk factors. Being overweight can raise blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels (a type of blood fat), lower the levels of high-density-lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL, the "good cholesterol"), raise blood pressure and induce diabetes.

A healthful diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables in combination with regular physical activity can help most people manage and maintain weight loss for both cardiovascular health and appearance. The American Heart Association urges people to take a safe and proven route to losing and maintaining weight -- by following our guidelines for healthy, nutritionally balanced weight loss for a lifetime of good health.