

Issue 56

In a nutshell

A highly restrictive milk and dairy only diet produced better compliance and weight loss in obese patients than conventional diet.

However, because study numbers were small and long-term follow-up results not yet available, it is hard to judge the significance of this trial.

Novel weight loss diets

Arbor Clinical Nutrition Updates 1998 (Dec);56:1-2 ISSN 1446-5450

ARCHIVED ISSUE

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NUTRITION RESEARCH REVIEW

A novel mono-diet can be as effective in producing weight loss in obese patients as the most successful drug treatment, according to the authors of a new study from Britain.

Method: Researchers took 45 obese outpatients (average BMI =44) over 16 weeks and randomly assigned them to follow either a conventional weight loss diet or a milk-only diet (which included yoghurt).

As another option, a third group was put onto a diet with milk plus only other food per day, chosen on rotation from 7 simple foods over a week.

(The energy content of the conventional diet was 3.4 mJ/day, the milk+one food diet averaged 5.6 mJ/day. The milk-only diet's average energy content was not reported, but was intended to produce a 7 MJ/day energy deficit).

Table: Weight loss after 16 weeks

Milk only	Milk + 1 food	Conventional
9.4kg	7.0kg	1.7kg
(5.9-12.9)	(2.7-11.3)	(0.3 to 3.7)

Results: The patients on a milk-only diet achieved the highest weight loss, with the milk+one food diet coming second - see table.

Of great interest was the fact that compliance was poorest in the conventional diet, although the exact figures are not given in the paper.

The British researchers commented that the weight loss achieved in the mono-diet was: "greater than the mean weight loss in one year in trials of pharmacological agents...".

Ref: *BMJ* 1998;317:1487-1489

Comments

This report has generated quite a deal of debate for several reasons.

Firstly, the highly restrictive and mono- diets used by researchers here are of the kind more often found in populist diet books that some would call 'fad diets'. Orthodox nutritionists have generally not been kind to such 'fad diets'.

Thus a well-conducted scientific trial that finds that such a highly restrictive diet can actually be quite effective is surprising and not without possible public health implications.

The second unexpected result is that people who followed these two highly restrictive diets were actually more compliant than those on conventional weight loss diets.

This last finding might go some way to explaining the popularity of some of the 'fad diets'. Perhaps

overweight people prefer or even need a little extremity when it comes to weight loss. This hypothesis touches on some fascinating corners of health behaviour theory and the placebo response. It is a pity that the authors did not provide more concrete data on this intriguing aspect of the trial so that we could further assess its implications.

It is always good to see scientific trials whose results question the orthodoxy of nutrition. However, a good deal of the comment on this article (as seen in the BMJ itself) has concerned possible limitations of the trial. Particularly the smallish numbers involved and the lack of longer-term follow-up.

The tendency of short term weight loss to 'revert to the mean' over time is notorious. This perhaps makes it a little unfair to compare 16 week weight loss with 1 year figures for pharmacological agents. At any rate, it will be interesting to review one year follow-up data if the researchers publish it in due course.

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