

Attitudes and Beliefs about Effective Ways to Lose Weight:
*A National Opinion Survey Conducted for
The Partnership for Essential Nutrition (PEN)*

An Executive Summary

Each year, an estimated 80 million Americans go on a diet, spending more than \$30 billion annually on all types of diet programs and products, including diet foods and drinks and over-the-counter diet aids. The reality is, a pervasive knowledge gap exists about the effective ways to achieve long-term weight loss. Because consumers are increasingly being bombarded with enticing claims for quick and easy solutions to their weight problems, many people are confused about what really works and some are investing their hopes (and their money) in fad diets and products that simply don't work and may, in fact, be harmful.

Because overweight increases the risk for a number of serious diseases (including diabetes, heart disease, stroke, osteoarthritis, gallbladder disease and some forms of cancer), ending the public's confusion over weight-loss claims is now one of the most important priorities for the public health community.

That is why the Partnership for Essential Nutrition (PEN) -- a coalition of non-profit nutrition and public health groups whose mission is to advance public understanding about the essentials of a nutritionally balanced diet -- commissioned a new survey to examine consumer attitudes and beliefs about weight loss. Conducted by Opinion Research Corporation*, this national poll of 1,014 adult Americans provides an up-to-date look at the experiences of people who are trying to lose weight and uncovers some of the common misperceptions associated with weight-loss failure.

Following is a summary of these research findings:

1. Many Americans are frequent dieters

- Of those adults polled, nine in ten (87 percent) said they spent the last year either on a diet or taking steps to maintain their weight. This includes 79.6 million or 41 percent of the adult population who were actively trying to lose weight.
- Looking at the last 5 years, the number of consumers who went on a diet is even higher; specifically, 87.4 million Americans (45 percent) dieted at least once.
- 58 million U.S. adults (30 percent) went on a diet two or more times during a 5-year period and 39 million (20 percent) dieted three times or more over 5 years.

2. Despite being concerned about their excess weight, many Americans hold major misconceptions that are contributing to weight-loss failure.

- When asked to name the most important factor in losing weight, less than half of those polled (45 percent) correctly identified consuming fewer calories. The remaining 55 percent named reducing fat (24 percent), reducing carbohydrates (18 percent), eating more protein (4 percent) or didn't know the answer (9 percent).
- Another common misperception is that eating certain foods in combination promotes weight loss. Here, over two-thirds of the public (69 percent) buys into this myth, even though the key to losing weight is consuming fewer calories, through both diet changes and exercise.
- Compounding the problem, almost half of those surveyed (48 percent) believe the claim that certain dietary supplements stimulate the body to lose weight. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), claims that special ingredients in dietary supplements can help people lose weight and fat are unproven.
- A number of dieters are willing to make radical changes in their eating patterns to lose a lot of weight quickly. Even though two thirds of those surveyed – 64 percent – planned to lose 1-2 pounds a week (considered by medical experts to be a safe level), more than one in four dieters (27 percent) had more aggressive goals. Specifically, 12 percent were aiming for 3 pounds a week, 10 percent planned to lose 4-5 pounds a week and 5 percent were aiming for 5 pounds or more. Only 1 percent planned to lose less than one pound weekly.
- The good news, however, is that Americans recognize the value of a supportive environment for long-term weight loss. According to the survey, nine in ten adults (88 percent) agree that a supportive atmosphere is important for losing weight and keeping it off.

3. Americans are using numerous methods to lose weight with mixed results.

- Although weight management specialists advocate losing excess pounds through a comprehensive weight-loss program (combining reduced calorie foods, more physical activity and a supportive atmosphere), less than one-fourth of all dieters (23 percent) are using this approach.
- Instead, the survey finds that many dieters (33 percent) are opting for exercise alone to lose weight, including half of all younger dieters aged 18-24 years. While physical activity is a very healthy thing to do, research shows that exercise is not an effective stand-alone weight-loss solution and should be combined with smarter food choices and cutting calories.
- American dieters are also experimenting with a number of weight-loss products to control when, what and how much they eat. This includes following a weight-loss

plan that specifies exactly what foods to eat (6 percent), using over-the-counter diet aids and diet foods (5 percent) and following the plans from diet books and the Internet (3 percent).

- Because of this fragmented approach, satisfaction with common weight-loss methods is mixed. While 46 percent of those surveyed were satisfied with the results, more than half (52 percent) was not completely satisfied, including 15 percent who were somewhat or very dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction is especially troubling to the public health community because it can lead to the belief that long-term weight loss isn't achievable.

4. Satisfaction with weight-loss methods greatest when consumers adopt comprehensive approach, recommended by public health leaders.

- Those who followed a comprehensive weight-loss program that combines reduced calorie foods, more physical activity and a supportive atmosphere reported the highest level of satisfaction (89 percent). This is in direct contrast with the high dissatisfaction rates associated with diet foods (60 percent), over-the-counter diet aids (49 percent), diet books (32 percent) and following a weight-loss plan that specifies exactly what foods to eat (25 percent).
- When it comes to the public's experiences with keeping the weight off for a year, the survey finds that dissatisfaction increases. Whereas 35 percent consider themselves "very successful" in maintaining the weight loss, another 41 percent report mixed progress. More significantly, more than one in five (21 percent) say they were not successful in maintaining their weight.

* The Opinion Research Corporation survey was based on telephone interviews with 503 men and 511 women aged 18 and over conducted between August 31 and September 3, 2006. To ensure a reliable and accurate representation of the total national adult population, complete interviews were weighted to known proportions for age, gender, geographic region, and race. The margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 3.1 percent.

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