

Heart Foundation diet? ^[1]

Alice,

I am looking for the American Heart Foundation's three day diet. Do you know where I can get a copy?

— Dieter

Answer

Dear Dieter,

What you are referring to may actually be found 'across the pond'. The British Heart Foundation Diet, (a.k.a: the Birmingham Cardiac Diet or the Greenland Diet), is a short-term diet plan that drastically restricts calories (as well as essential nutrients). The meal plan consists of three small meals and totals about 1200 calories per day. In online forums that discuss the diet, some claim to have lost up to 40 pounds in a month. However, searching for this diet to achieve weight loss, by any name, may be worthy of some skepticism and a critical eye.

In fact, the British Heart Foundation has taken measures to bust the health claims of the diet that has usurped its name ^[2]. The foundation describes diets like this as "fad" diets and warns that most health care professionals and dietitians discourage such restrictive, "crash" or short-term eating plans.

It's good to be skeptical about these types of diets. Here's a few reasons why:

- **Fad diets don't change your overall eating habits.** While you might lose initial weight quickly on a fad diet, they don't typically address or alter long-term eating patterns. That means you're likely to regain the weight you lost once you end the diet and return to your established ways of eating.
- **Rapid weight loss (more than a half to one pound per week) is usually not fat loss.** In extreme calorie restriction your body will shed water, and even begin to break down muscle (which is called wasting). Muscle loss puts you at a metabolic disadvantage — it actually will make it harder to burn calories and fat in the future. Dehydration (from water loss) will also make it harder for your body to operate at peak performance. These conditions can

contribute to irritability, mood swings, food cravings, and general malaise that many people feel under conditions of not eating enough.

- **It doesn't just restrict calories.** Because the diet has so few recommended foods, you may be depriving your body of the nutrients it needs to function well and prevent disease in the long-term. Although fad diets are meant to be short-term, cumulative effects of under-nutrition (especially if you crash diet frequently in the case of so-called “yo-yo” dieting) can have a negative impact on your immune system as well as your ability to remain at a stable and healthy weight in the future.

Now that you know a bit about the risks associated with the fad diet, there are some red flags to look out for that may indicate a diet is more than likely too good to be true. You may want to avoid diets that make claims to work with or guarantee any of the following:

- Losing more than one pound per week
- Unlimited quantities of one food or a restricted food list
- Designated meal times or specific food combinations
- Inflexible menus
- No need to exercise

While in some cases having a restrictive menu is needed, for a majority of individuals it's not necessary to be healthy. Also, a severe or too strict dieting lifestyle can get in the way of the simple pleasures of life — after all, there are a lot of healthy and delicious foods out there! It might also be worth chatting with a registered dietician to figure out an eating plan that can help you achieve your weight goals while providing the pleasures of healthy cuisine. You might speak to your health care provider for a referral.

Remember, the only proven method for weight loss and weight maintenance while supporting your health in the long-term is to eat a balanced diet and to get plenty of physical activity. This tried-and-true method doesn't have the same speedy weight loss claims that fad diets do, but it has the added benefit of being better for your body and possibly being more pleasurable.

With heart,

Alice!

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