



Diets

This mirror has two faces!

The withdrawal of Simply Slim from the market earlier this year has once again put the spotlight on diet products, and the modern person's and media's obsession with a slim figure. We look at the kinks and keys to (sustainable) weight loss and at what the experts have to say about this controversial issue.

By Helen Ueckermann

Legend has it that the English king William the Conqueror in 1087 had trouble staying on his horse because he was too heavy. It is said that the frustrated king took to his bed and refused to eat another bite. Instead of food, he only drank alcohol in order to get rid of the excess weight. If this story is true, it is possibly the very first recording of someone who adapted his food intake in order to reduce weight. Today, many people will be able to identify with this erstwhile king's struggle. They try every syrup and shake – without being aware of the hidden dangers of these products – and most often without any sustainable results.

Kinks and keys

According to the World Health Organization 1.7 billion people on the planet are overweight. Locally, inspectors from the Medicines Control Council (MCC) have had their hands full over the past few months to prevent dangerous slimming products being brought into the country.

At least eight slimming products that were imported from China to South Africa have tested positive for the prescription drug sibutramine, that experts claim can be very dangerous because of the high levels of active ingredients that it contains.

According to health regulations any pill containing sibutramine must be registered as a prescription drug and may not contain more than 15 mg of this ingredient. Popular products that can be bought over the counter and that have tested positive for sibutramine include Simply Slim, Forme Slim, NuEvo, HNS New Me, Maxi Slim, Studio Slim, Evo Slim and Slimline.

Sibutramine is especially dangerous for people with a history of cardiovascular disease, strokes, problems with heart rhythm, cardiac failure and blood pressure problems.

Ms Anne Till, registered dietician from Bryanston, says apart from the unhealthy and even life-threatening side effects, the biggest problem with slimming pills, syrups and shakes is that one learns nothing about healthy eating habits, weight and appetite control, behaviour or lifestyle changes.

"These are all fundamental keys to successful weight loss and management. Rather than making these keys a part of their daily lives, people expose themselves to the risks of among others high blood pressure, accelerated heart beat, palpitations, glaucoma, drug addiction, irritability and sleeplessness by using diet products that have often not been properly tested scientifically," says Till.

"Research showing that overweight leads to

Your questions answered

- **What is Body Mass Index (BMI)?** BMI is the most common way to determine whether someone is underweight, overweight or has a normal weight. Divide your weight (in kilograms) by the square of your length ($BMI = \text{kg}/\text{m}^2$). A BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is regarded as normal. Lower than 18.5 is underweight, while a score of more than 30 could be regarded as obese.
- **What size should my portions be?** Fish: it should fit into the palm of your hand; meat: as big as a pack of cards; fruit: as big as a tennis ball; margarine or butter: as small as a dice.
- **Where do I start?** Stay away from refined foods with high sugar levels, very fatty foods or fast food. Pack your own healthy lunch to take to work. Make sure that your portions are small enough to promote weight loss and restrict your alcohol consumption.

morbidity and the emphasis on a slim figure have given rise to this pursuit of weight loss.

"People tend to think that weight loss should be easy. The fact is that it entails a complete change in lifestyle, which requires dedication. People mistakenly think that they can resume their old habits as soon as they have reached their target weight.

"There are even those who think that strict rules could help them lose weight, such as combining certain foods, eating only protein or not taking in any fat," says Till.

A healthy relationship

According to Dr Susan Kriegler, psychologist from Pretoria, strict rules or excessively drastic steps to lose weight serve no long-term goal.

"A person who has inner peace and feels good about himself and his life has a stable foundation to create a more healthy relationship with his body and with food."

Kriegler feels that positive thoughts and feelings are necessary. "Don't build your diet plan on self-rejection. Don't look in the mirror and tell yourself: 'I am ugly and fat.' Remember, you are a valuable and lovable person who deserves to be proud of the body that you lovingly take care of.

"Self-love means that you find a balance between soft love (encouragement and support) and tough love (discipline, realistic boundaries and attainable goals)." >>>

Kriegler says if you really have a persistent weight problem, it means that the problem could be rooted in your subconscious mind or in your early childhood. "It's not a bad idea to talk to a psychologist."

Dr Arien van der Merwe, director of Health Stress Management in Pretoria, says the most important aspect is to learn how to eat healthily, exercise moderately and to listen to your body. She believes in following a holistic approach.

"Even if all your diets thus far have led to disappointment, there is hope if you are prepared to adapt your lifestyle. You should start with self-acceptance and gratitude for your wonderful body and everything that it does without any input from you! You eat, your food is catabolised, assimilated and used as building blocks, waste materials are excreted, you breathe, your heart beats, you are able to think, wounds heal by itself! If you start with this mindset and believe that you will attain a balanced weight, it will happen.

"Change your thinking. Your body would like to be healthy and in balance; your self-torment about your figure creates emotions that handicap your own efforts," she says. "Eventually, the question of weight is personal and unique and there is no single solution that works for everyone."

Till's advice is to never give up hope. "There is a solution for each person who is struggling with their weight. Go and see a dietician and do not depend on any quick-fix diets."

A second opinion...

- **Jonathan Kohn, fitness instructor at Virgin Active in Roodepoort:** "To stay healthy and lose weight at the same time, it is necessary to combine healthy eating habits with physical activities. Exercise at least three times a week for 40 minutes at a time. Choose a form of exercise that you enjoy and that suits your lifestyle – like walking at a stiff pace, attending aerobic or dance classes at a gym, exercising with weights or swimming."
- **Anne Till, dietician from Johannesburg:** "To keep your weight under control, it is important to choose your food correctly. The basic principle is to eat breakfast each day – such as high-fibre cereals, a fruit and a protein portion such as an egg or dairy product. Your lunch or evening meal should consist of large portions of vegetables or salad, and lean protein portions such as fish, chicken without skin or fat-free cottage cheese. Drink six to eight glasses of water per day."
- **Dr Susan Kriegler, psychologist from Pretoria:** "Think long term. Rather spend a year of gradually eating less and getting a little more exercise than going on a quick diet. As soon as they stop the diet, most people regain the weight they had lost, plus a few kilo's more! Make sure you never develop that feeling of self-pity that develops when you deprive yourself of a full stomach and enjoying food." 📧

New regulations

From 1 March next year new regulations will apply to how food manufacturers pack their food products. Some of these regulations include:

- No manufacturer of any food products will be able to claim nutritional values unless the food has been analysed in an accredited laboratory.
- Some of the expressions that will be prohibited, include: *rich in, good source of, enriched with X, with added Y, or contains Z*. Expressions that will be allowed, are: *low in, free from, nearly free from, source of, high, or very high in*.
- No product may be advertised as "supported or endorsed by a medical doctor".
- The expressions *healthy* and *nutritious* are also prohibited.
- Nutritional or energy claims on water are also forbidden.
- The statement "sugar-free" is prohibited on products that do contain sugars such as fructose, honey, fruit juice and fruit juice concentrate.

