

Is Losing Weight Just Another Hunger Game?

By ACSH Staff — September 1, 2015



Gary Taubes has been saying for years that the nation's obesity

problem is due to our propensity for consuming sugars and refined grains, but not due to overconsumption of fat. He's been fighting low-fat diet advice for years. His latest essay, [Diets that Ignore Hunger](#) [1], is a continuation of that fight but with a new twist. Taubes now seems to be saying that dieting itself is ineffective because calorie reduction leads to hunger, and humans are not going to be able to ignore that.

As his main example of hunger's psychological effects on dieters, Taubes cites the semi-starvation experiments run at the University of Minnesota in the 1940s. Participants in those studies, which lasted about six months, suffered a variety of psychological effects such as obsessing about food, depression and irritability, among others. And he's correct that these situations did occur. But given that long-term starvation has such effects, what does that have to do with the composition of weight-loss diets?

Taubes dismisses the recent study from the NIH (which we reviewed [here](#) [2]) which compared low-fat vs. low-carb weight loss diets in a tightly controlled setting, because he said it was too short to be relevant. But we disagree such well controlled studies are the only accurate way to learn if there are any substantial differences between low-carb and low-fat diets with respect to weight loss. And this study found that the differences were minor.

Taubes suggests that weight-loss dieting is doomed to failure because hunger will overcome will every time. While it's true that the recidivism rate for dieters is high and weight-loss maintenance is difficult for many of us, some do manage to lose and retain their loss. For example, the [National Weight Loss Registry](#) [3] tracks thousands of people who have lost at least 30 pounds and maintained their losses for substantial periods of time.

Further, his suggestion that hunger is ignored when weight loss is prescribed misses the efforts by the pharmaceutical industry to control hunger via medications used for weight loss. While a totally effective weight loss drug has not yet been found, some do indeed reduce dieters' food craving. In

addition, Taubes doesn't factor in the effects of regular exercise which is important for weight loss maintenance as well as hunger control.

In his essay, Taubes also states that "a selling point for carbohydrate-restricted diets has always been that you can eat to satiety; counting calories is unnecessary, so long as carbohydrates are mostly avoided." He then goes on: "If people on low-carb diets eat less (the conventional explanation for any loss of fat that ensues), why aren't they hungry?"

First, a high-fat, low-carb diet is probably more satiating than a high-carb diet. And while those on the low-carb diet may eat less food, they're not necessarily eating fewer calories than on a low-fat, high-carb diet. That's why the tightly controlled NIH diet study is important.

Dr. Ruth Kava, American Council on Science and Health Senior Nutrition Fellow, commented, "Mr. Taubes seems to be bending over backwards to say that low-carb diets are better for weight loss than are low-fat diets because they don't make dieters hungry. But the degree of hunger likely also depends on the degree of caloric restriction, not only on diet composition."

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[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/opinion/diet-advice-that-ignores-hunger.html>

[2] <http://acsh.org/2015/08/that-perennial-question-low-fat-or-low-carb-addressed-again/>

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