Why Diets Don't Work!

By Tracy Butler Coe, R.D., L.D.

Dieting Definitely Doesn't Work.

This point has been proven research study after research study and diet after diet. Understandably, there are many reasons why individuals follow diets such as for chronic disease prevention or disease management, but possibly the most common reason individuals follow diets is for weight loss or weight management. The word diet can refer to a special diet such as a diabetic diet to control blood sugar or a low fat diet for heart disease, but a person's diet can also be the food and drink a person normally takes in one day. Much of the way we see and hear the word diet used today is in the terms of weight management and promotion of fad diets. For example, the “Cabbage Soup Diet” and the “Beverly Hills Diet” are types of fad diets. Fad diets can be dangerous, unproductive, and unhealthy. Let's look at why diets don't work.

Diets Lack Variety.

This is especially true with diets that outline exactly which foods to eat every day. They typically tell you to eat the same foods day after day; offering little variety. A lack of variety leads to boredom which usually leads to abandoning the diet. A healthy, nutrient dense meal plan should contain a variety of foods from the five food groups. By eating a variety of foods you can be certain to get all the vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and phytochemicals you need. Trying different foods such as new fruits and vegetables is an easy way to increase the variety of nutrients you are getting each day. Be creative with the way in which you use fruits and vegetables. Use them in salads, snacks, or low fat shakes.

Diets Typically Restrict Calories to Unnecessarily Low Levels.

Low calorie intake for gymnasts can be detrimental to your health, performance, and metabolism. By following diets that don't meet your calorie requirements, it is doubtful that your important carbohydrate, protein, vitamin, and mineral needs are being met. Not meeting your daily nutrient needs can impact your metabolism or metabolic rate. Think of your metabolic rate as your internal fire. When you have a strong internal fire, your body burns calories freely and produces energy. If you are eating too few calories, your body can slow down its metabolic rate to conserve calories. This may mean storing calories rather than burning them readily for energy. Remember, calories are important. They fuel your muscles to produce energy.

Some Diets Eliminate Specific Food Groups.
Diets which eliminate food groups from your daily meal plan, can leave you lacking in important nutrients. For example, eliminating dairy products without appropriate calcium supplementation can lead to decreased bone density (bone strength). We all know bone strength is important for gymnasts.

**Diets Typically Rule Foods As Good Foods or Bad Foods.**

Diets can force you to label foods as “good” or “bad.” Placing foods into categories, eating only “good” foods, and forbidding yourself the “bad” foods can lead to feelings of deprivation. These feeling can lead to obsession about the “bad” foods. Boy, can this leave you powerless and cause undesired cravings for these foods. Enjoy a daily supply of nutrient dense foods such as fruits, vegetable, lean meats, carbohydrates, and low fat dairy. Let's call these supportive foods—supportive in supplying energy and nutrients that hard working muscles need. Large quantities of higher fat foods are not recommended but an occasional cookie, ice cream and/or piece of candy can be supportive. They satisfy a craving for sweets and by eating them you learn to eat in moderation. Remember, all foods can fulfill a purpose.

**A Diet Implies A Beginning And An End.**

Highly restricted diets are not meant to last forever, therefore, they do not encourage balanced eating as a lifestyle. If your goal is to have optimum energy, health and performance, make a commitment to good nutrition for a lifetime.

This article is reprinted from the March/April 1998 *USA Gymnastics* magazine.