

Fad fighters

What are the top nutrition and performance quick-fixes for the new season? There aren't any! If a fitness solution seems too good to be true, it probably is. Here are the top 10 fruitless fads — the ones you really must ignore, says *David Bradford*

You pigged out over Christmas, drank until you fell over, and missed at least a fortnight of training when the roads were covered in ice. Now you're feeling fat, lethargic and desperate. The new season is almost upon us, and you are starting to panic. You fear that you don't have time to squeeze in the necessary training and healthy living to get into peak shape before your first big event of the new year. The temptation

is to search for a radical solution — something that will achieve startling results in a very short time. Your list of wants reads like a *Men's Health* cover: lose your belly in the bedroom; abduct your gut by eating flying saucers; full-body detox with gin, etc. Bad news: it ain't gonna happen!

The diet industry is enormous — there are hundreds of books and magazines about slimming, as well as dieting classes and literally thousands of 'slimming' foods. It's a self-perpetuating market; more

than 90 per cent of slimmers put the weight back on. Similarly, many people are taken in by the promise of 'flushing out toxins' with so-called 'miracle' foods and potions. The evidence for these products is sketchy, and faddists are doomed to suffer from bodyweight fluctuation and below-par general health. Face the facts: exercising regularly and meeting your body's energy requirement with wholesome foods in the long term equals optimum weight and good health.



1 Detox

The claim: Abstaining from proper food and instead using herbs, magnets, special water and snake-stones removes toxins and purifies the body.

The reality: As with many of these madcap plans, it is basically a common sense truth stretched to its illogical, absurd extreme. The common sense bit is that abstaining from toxic substances, such as fast food and alcohol, prevents the damage from escalating and gives your body a chance to recover.

But this simple truth has been bogusly extended to include all kinds of crazy ideas, from taking alternate hot/cold showers to 'Quantum Eating'... and we weren't joking about the snake-stones! All of which is usually 'guaranteed' to return your body to a state of Edenic purity within 72 hours.

"Eating foods free from additives, preservatives and pesticides is sensible," says Lucy McCrickard, nutritional therapist of LGM Nutrition (www.lgmnutrition.co.uk). "But it is more important to take on all the base nutrients by eating a balanced diet. This keeps liver function at its optimum. The liver is our internal 'chemical factory', which — with the lungs, kidneys, skin, lymphatic system and intestines — plays a vital role in ridding our system of toxic load."

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**3 Juice/soup diet**

The claim: Consuming only fruit juice or cabbage soup is the fastest way to lose weight.

The reality: It is obvious that only drinking juice or eating low-calorie soup will lead to dramatic weight loss. But it is also obvious that you will be punishing your body with a severe course of malnourishment. As an active person, you cannot afford to do that. The insufficient supply of energy will wipe out your immune system and leave you far too weak and tired to train properly. As if that were not bad enough, the digestive (and toilet visit) consequences of taking on only liquid food may be bad enough to evacuate buildings!

"There is nothing wrong with soup itself, but to supply a nutritious diet you need a good variety of ingredients, including all the major food groups," explains McCrickard. "Unless you are very careful, your soup diet could lack protein and fibre. The juice-only idea is a complete no-no; juices are extremely high in sugar and lacking in fibre and proteins."

5 Healthy treats

The claim: Cakes and biscuits marketed as 'healthy' help you lose weight.

The reality: When you look beyond the low-fat/low-calorie slogans on the packaging, you realise a cake is a cake and a biscuit is a biscuit. In other words, these foods are inherently high in sugar and fat, and provide quick-release carbs that won't keep you feeling full for very long. The branding is clever, no doubt, but not too clever to fool us weight-conscious cyclists. If the packaging claims 'less than five per cent fat' that doesn't mean what's inside is healthy

— it might be 95 per cent sugar. Equally, if it states a seemingly low calorie figure, ask yourself why. It's usually because each cake or biscuit is frankly tiny, and you need to eat two or more just to stave off your hunger pangs and fuel your ride. On the flip-side, it is also worth asking yourself whether you really need that high-calorie energy drink or gel; if the ride is shorter than 90 minutes, you probably don't.

"Products sold as 'low-fat' tend to be high in sugar — a major factor in weight gain," warns McCrickard. "Sugar is used as a taste substitute for flavour taken

out when fat content is reduced. The most effective way to lose weight is to substantially reduce sugar intake, reduce saturated and trans fats found in red meat, processed foods, cakes and biscuits, and include plenty of vegetables, moderate amounts of fruit, and good lean protein sources such as white meat, fish, pulses, beans and nuts. Opt for good, essential fats, including omega-3 from oily fish, nuts and seeds, since these are important for brain health, nerve function, hormone production, immune support, and vitamin absorption."

DON'T FOLLOW THE FAD

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**2 Atkins diet**

The claim: Avoiding carbohydrate and eating only protein and fat will help you reach your target weight.

The reality: As a cyclist, you know better than most that carbohydrate is the body's favoured energy source. Indeed, your body performs at its best when it has plentiful supplies of stored glucose (glycogen),

which is easily metabolised and turned into energy. It is obvious, therefore, that if you deprive your body of carbs, you will inevitably reduce your overall calorie intake — and in the short term lose weight. Meanwhile, your body searches frantically for energy from alternative stores, principally fat.

It is difficult to overstate the hazards involved

in replacing pasta and wholegrain foods with steak and fried eggs. First, there are the practical pitfalls: you will not have the energy available to train optimally; you will feel lethargic; and your breath will stink (a side-effect of metabolising fat). Worse still, the abnormally high intake of fat and red meat, and the lack of fibre,

increases your risk of heart disease and colon cancer.

"This diet is hard to stick to, and why would you want to?" asks McCrickard. "The high levels of protein can make the body very acidic, and you're liable to consume too much saturated fat, potentially causing kidney damage and unpleasant side-effects."

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**4 Hangover cures**

The claim: You can get rid of a hangover simply by blending together a special mix of ingredients.

The reality: No you can't! It's important to understand what a hangover actually is, in order to accept that a fruit smoothie isn't likely to fix it in five minutes. When you over-indulge, the alcohol has a diuretic effect, causing you to become dehydrated. It also irritates your gut, disrupts your sleep, causes a build-up of toxins in the liver, and destabilises your blood sugar level. It is this maelstrom of problems that leaves you feeling acutely rough. The hangover is a complex malaise, not fully understood by science, and there is no quick-fix way to regain full health.

"After drinking, the liver and kidneys are over-burdened trying to process chemicals," explains McCrickard. "Adding more alcohol, caffeine or nicotine only increases the toxic load. Drink plenty of water before going to bed and take some vitamin C, which helps metabolise alcohol. On waking, more water and fruit juice will help, as will ginger tea, which can settle the stomach. Food should include slow-release carbs to balance blood sugar. Eggs can help, since they contain cysteine, which supports the metabolic action of the liver, but a full fry-up might irritate the stomach. Bananas are a good idea, to replace electrolytes, such as potassium."



DON'T FOLLOW THE FAD

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8 Hyper hydration

The claim: Drinking at least eight glasses of water each day ‘purifies’ the body.
The reality: Your body is incredibly sophisticated when it comes to maintaining optimum hydration. When your body needs more water, your brain recognises that it is time to drink. Thirst is a marvellous thing — it’s highly sensitive and accurate, and rarely goes wrong; if it does, there is something awry. It’s a shame that ‘obey your thirst’ has been cheapened and used as a marketing slogan, because it’s spot-on advice: if you feel thirsty, drink. Downing glass after glass of water all day long will not do you any good and is more likely to cause electrolyte disturbances than to ‘flush out toxins’. What’s more, drinking huge quantities during sporting events has been known to cause hyponatremia, a potentially lethal accumulation of water in the body.

“It is not necessary to drink more than that which quenches your thirst,” confirms sports scientist Ross Tucker (www.sportsscientists.com). “The thirst mechanism is highly sensitive and very successful at what it is meant to do: maintain your osmolality [fluid-to-electrolyte ratio], not your weight. If you lose a few kilos while exercising, it doesn’t mean you are dangerously dehydrated.”

INSTEAD OF FADS...

Fad diets are an effective way to make your bodyweight seesaw more frenetically than an overexcited child, but they will diminish your energy levels and destroy your cycling. It is far more sensible to eat healthily all year round. Here are Lucy McCrickard’s top tips for weight management:

- Avoid saturated and trans fats.
- Avoid processed foods, such as ready meals, white pasta, white bread and white rice.
- Reduce sugar intake.
- Reduce caffeine, salt and alcohol — and other stimulants that can stress the liver.
- Aim for low glycaemic load (GL) foods that release carbohydrate levels slowly and help keep blood sugar levels stable.
- Eat seasonal, organic and fresh foods wherever possible for maximum nutrient content.
- Stick to lean protein sources — white meat, fish (including oily fish), nuts, seeds and vegetarian proteins such as beans, pulses and nuts.
- Don’t cut out any food groups.
- Keep cycling!

Once you’ve cleaned up your diet with these simple tips you should be well on your way to reaching a healthy weight for cycling. If you need an extra boost to get you down to a super-light race weight for short-term goals then turn to page 70 for some quick, safe and healthy advice.

6 Raw food diet

The claim: Grazing on raw foods is healthier than eating cooked meals.

The reality: Before we dismiss this idea out of hand, we must acknowledge that raw foods do have some health benefits — but, then again, so do deep-fried Mars bars; no food is wholly detrimental. There is compelling evidence that cooking food is what allowed our ape forebears to evolve into humans (a theory expounded by Richard Wrangham in his book *Catching Fire*). The gist of the argument is that, after pre-humans discovered fire and started cooking their food, they used less energy on digestion — note how puny our jaws are compared to chimps’ — and so had spare reserves, which allowed their brains to develop. Cooking also rendered safe many naturally occurring poisons and bacteria — another big advantage. Whether or not you buy that evolutionary theory, you can’t deny that cooked food is more digestible; getting sufficient energy from raw foods, particularly for a cyclist, would be very difficult indeed. So you can breathe a sigh of relief and fire up the stove!

“The only thing in favour of this idea is that nutrients are kept intact in uncooked foods in their natural state,” says McCrickard. “This ensures that natural enzymes are retained, which may have certain benefits. On the negative side, raw foods contain high levels of fibre, which can act as an irritant to the gut and make digestion difficult. They may also contain high levels of pesticides, and lack vitamin B12, calcium and protein.”

7 Weight-loss supplements

The claim: The best way to lose weight is by popping belly-busting pills.

The reality: There is a variety of weight loss drugs on the market, and they work (the few that do actually work) by suppressing appetite, speeding up metabolism or preventing the body from absorbing fats. As emphasised with regard to hydration, above, your body is highly efficient; it processes the stuff you put into it with incredible efficiency and accuracy. Why would you want to mess with the internal running of a precision instrument? Your body adapts to your training —

burning, storing and ‘demanding’ energy accordingly. Unless you’re dangerously obese, tampering with this system by means of drugs is pointless and stupid. Weight loss is a simple equation: burn more than you consume. Increasing your cycling mileage, rather than just giving up cakes, is the best way to shed the kilos, obviously. That said, there are some food supplements — as opposed to drugs — that if taken in conjunction with a clean diet and training can improve body composition. Turn to page 80 for more.

“Substances in weight-loss drugs

can have serious side effects,” warns McCrickard, “affecting blood pressure and blood circulation, which can cause heart problems. The cocktail of ingredients in some of them can also lead to digestive problems such as diarrhoea and bloating, as well as mood swings, depression and impotence. These supplements tend to be unregulated so, again, a healthy balanced diet is safer in the long run.”

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9 Miracle foods

The claim: Certain foods have miraculous powers, ‘undoing’ the ill effects alcohol and junk food.

The reality: We all know that some foods have a higher nutritional value than others; that isn’t up for debate. The problem with the drive towards ‘miracle foods’ is that it sends out a misleading message: eat this or that super-potent fruit or vegetable and it’ll pardon a multitude of sins. Truth is, everybody — particularly those of us who exercise regularly — need to eat a balanced, varied diet all of the time, while steering clear of junk food. If you down a crateful of beer and a fatty kebab, a carton of blueberries isn’t going to clear your system — or your conscience!

“There’s an increasing number of so-called ‘miracle foods’,” says McCrickard, “that are thought to help limit the damage we do through poor diet. Top of the list are antioxidant-rich foods including berries and brightly coloured fruits and vegetables. The best solution, however, is to avoid eating the ‘bad’ foods in the first place, thus limiting the need for miraculous repair. Always aim to eat fresh, organic and seasonal foods, moderate your intake of stimulants such as caffeine and alcohol, and avoid processed foods that contain additives and preservatives.”



10 South Beach diet

The claim: A multi-phase approach, focusing on good fats and good carbs, is the fast ticket to a beach body.

The reality: Want a body fit for South Beach, Miami? Of course you do. This diet was basically a reworking, by cardiologist Arthur Agatston, of the Atkins idea. It's slightly more nuanced and thoughtful, in that as it does not advocate ditching

all carbohydrate in favour of protein, but instead eating only those sources of carbs that have a low glycaemic index (GI). Unlike Atkins, the South Beach diet does not claim it is OK to eat bacon and steaks instead of carbs, but advises against 'bad' fats, favouring protein-rich foods that are low in saturated fat. In essence, then, this is perhaps the most sensible fad diet in our list, but it's a fad nonetheless — a sexed-up repackaging

of common sense healthy eating, using excessive jargon.

"The theory behind this diet is that carbs break down into sugars," explains McCrickard, "which can upset blood sugar balance and lead to weight gain. But its initial restriction of carbs makes it hard to stick to. Carbs are vital for cyclists, for energy production, and slow-releasing carbs should be combined with protein to keep you feeling satiated for longer."



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