When it comes to sorting out nutrition information, how do you know whether or not it is reliable? Reliable information does not support food fads or unbalanced eating. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics defines “food fads” as “unreasonable or exaggerated beliefs that eating (or not eating) specific foods, nutrient supplements or combinations of certain foods may cure disease, convey special health benefits or offer quick weight loss.”

In reality, there is no “super food” or “diet” that can quickly and safely remove weight gained from overeating or inactivity and keep it off over time. This is because most fad diets don’t teach new eating habits. Many require you to give up your favorite foods. As a result, people usually don’t stick to them. How can you find out whether a diet plan or dietary supplement is safe to use? Follow these tips to help evaluate a new product, diet, or recommendation:

- If it sounds too good to be true, it is—especially if the diet or product offers a “quick fix.”
- Avoid products offering a guaranteed cure or that promote “limited-time offers.”
- Watch out for products that describe certain foods as “good” or “bad.”
- Is the source of the information, such as a book author, trying to sell an unbalanced diet plan or a product like dietary supplements?
- Fad diets may require you to avoid foods or entire food groups. Countless reputable studies over many years have shown that balance and variety are needed for good health. Any diet that requires you to give up whole categories of foods and take supplements to replace their nutrients is, by definition, unbalanced.
- Go beyond the headline teaser whether in print or on television. This is an attention-grabbing statement that may have some truth to it, but as you read the details a different story emerges. The real story is usually at the end.
- The science of nutrition and human health is constantly evolving. This constant change creates confusion as we hear contradicting information. Remember that “new” means recent and often the media will report findings as “fact” when the information is preliminary in nature.
- When it comes to information on the Internet, remember that anyone can post anything! Always consider the source of the information by seeing who is responsible for the site. Web addresses ending in “.gov,” “.edu,” or “.org” are reliable. Commercial sites end in “.com” and will generally promote or try to sell a product, so be wary of the information unless you are familiar with the sponsor.
- The same tips apply to apps. Look for apps sponsored by government, educational, or professional nutrition education organizations or other health/medical groups that are not promoting or selling a specific diet or dietary product.
The bottom line: look to see if the product’s or diet plan’s claims are backed up by a body of scientific research rather than just one study—or none at all. Do reputable scientific and professional organizations support the claims? If the answer to these questions is no, then you can find a better, healthier weight-loss plan that is right for you. Consult a registered dietitian. He or she will work with you to develop a personalized plan providing a balanced approach for long-term success. To find a registered dietitian, contact your local hospital or check the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics website at www.eatright.org.

Reputable professional organizations that can provide information on balanced diets or bogus diet products include:

- Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: www.eatright.org
- Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior: www.sneb.org
- Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.gov
- Federal Trade Commission: ftc.gov
- U.S. Department of Agriculture: www.nutrition.gov and www.choosemyplate.gov
- University nutrition departments and Cooperative Extension services; in Pennsylvania, visit Penn State Extension at extension.psu.edu or contact your county extension office.

Sources