Stride

KEEP ON MOVING | WELLNESS GUIDE | MYTH VS FACT

The Nutrition FAQ Myth vs Fact

15 common questions about eating to lose weight, gain weight and stay well, answered with verified evidence.

Short answers, honest caveats and a numbered source for every claim, with examples from Nigerian kitchens and research from around the world.

CHAPTER 1

Losing Weight Without the Myths

QUESTION 1 · LOSING WEIGHT

Do I have to cut out carbs to lose weight?

MYTH	Carbs make you fat, so cutting them out is the only way to lose weight.
FACT	**In a 12-month trial of 609 adults, a healthy low-carb diet and a healthy low-fat diet led to about the same weight loss.**[1]

The DIETFITS trial randomised overweight adults to either approach. After a year, the low-fat group had lost about 5.3 kg on average and the low-carb group about 6.0 kg, a difference that was not statistically significant.[1] Neither genes nor insulin response predicted who did better on which diet.[1] The lead researcher's takeaway was that both groups did the same basic things: they ate less sugar and refined flour and more vegetables.[2]

TRY THIS You don't need to drop rice, beans or plantain. Cut back on sugary drinks and refined snacks first, then choose an eating pattern you can keep up for months.

QUESTION 2 · LOSING WEIGHT

How fast should I lose weight?

MYTH	The faster the weight comes off, the better.
FACT	**People who lose weight gradually, about 1–2 lb (0.5–1 kg) a week, are more likely to keep it off than people who lose it faster.**[3]

That is the CDC's guidance.[3] Even a modest loss helps: dropping 5% of body weight (10 lb for a 200 lb person, or 5 kg for a 100 kg person) can improve blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar.[3] The CDC also warns that unrealistic goals, such as losing 20 lb in two weeks, tend to leave people feeling defeated and frustrated.[3]

TRY THIS Set a small weekly target, such as one food swap a day or a 15-minute walk, rather than a crash plan.

QUESTION 3 · LOSING WEIGHT

Is skipping meals or intermittent fasting the best way to lose weight?

MYTH	Fasting burns fat faster than ordinary dieting.
FACT	**Reviews of randomised trials find intermittent fasting works about as well as ordinary calorie reduction, not better.**[4]

A Cochrane review of 26 trials found that intermittent fasting may lead to more weight loss than eating as usual, but not more than standard calorie-restricted diets.[4] The studies lasted from four weeks to six months, so long-term results are less clear.[4] If a fasting pattern fits your routine it is one option, not a shortcut.

TRY THIS Whatever you choose, keep eating enough protein and vegetables. If you have diabetes, take medication, are pregnant or have had an eating disorder, speak to a clinician before fasting.

QUESTION 4 · LOSING WEIGHT

Do detox diets and cleanses work?

MYTH	A detox or juice cleanse flushes out toxins and melts fat.
FACT	**There is very little clinical evidence that commercial detox diets remove toxins or give lasting weight loss.**[5]

A critical review of popular detox diets found no randomised controlled trials testing commercial detox diets in humans, and noted that the products rarely name the toxins they claim to remove.[5] The US National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health adds that juicing and detox diets can cause early weight loss because they are so low in calories, but weight tends to return once normal eating resumes.[6] Some programmes also involve laxatives, diuretics or supplements, which carry their own risks.[5]

TRY THIS Be cautious with any product that promises to “flush” or “cleanse” you. Regular meals built on vegetables, beans and whole grains are a safer place to start.

CHAPTER 2

Gaining Weight and Building Muscle

QUESTION 5 · GAINING WEIGHT

I'm underweight. Can I just eat anything to gain weight?

MYTH	Fried and sugary foods are the fastest way to gain, so they're fine.
FACT	**Gaining gradually from nutritious food is safer. The NHS suggests adding around 300–500 extra calories a day.[7]**

NHS advice for underweight adults is to add healthy calories gradually, eat smaller meals more often and add snacks between meals.[7] Being underweight can mean missing out on vitamins and minerals, and the NHS advises speaking to a GP if you have lost weight suddenly or without trying.[7] WHO adds that industrially produced trans fats are not part of a healthy diet and should be avoided.[8]

TRY THIS Add groundnuts, beans, an extra egg or a drizzle of oil to meals you already eat, and keep a nutritious snack between meals.

QUESTION 6 · GAINING WEIGHT

How much protein do I need to build muscle, and do I need protein powder?

MYTH	You can't build muscle without protein shakes.
FACT	**Protein supports muscle gain when you lift weights, but in trials gains stopped rising above about 1.6 g per kg of body weight a day, and food can supply it.[9]**

A meta-analysis of 49 trials (1,863 people) found that extra protein modestly increased strength and muscle size during resistance training, and that total intakes above about 1.62 g/kg/day brought no further gain in fat-free mass.[9] For a 70 kg person, 1.6 g/kg is about 112 g a day. WHO says 10–15% of daily energy from protein is generally enough for most adults, with more for athletes and people building muscle.[8] A shake is one way to reach your total, not a requirement.

TRY THIS Beans, eggs, fish, chicken and groundnuts are everyday protein sources. Pair them with strength training if muscle is your goal.

CHAPTER 3

What's on Your Plate?

QUESTION 7 · THE NIGERIAN PLATE

Are rice, yam, garri and bread “bad” for me?

MYTH	Rice, yam and garri are fattening, so I should avoid them.
FACT	**Nigeria’s own guidelines put grains, roots and tubers at the base of the food pyramid, to be eaten at every meal alongside vegetables and fruit.**[10]

The Food-Based Dietary Guidelines for Nigeria also say total food intake should match your level of physical activity, and that people doing manual work need more food than those with sedentary jobs.[10] The concern for many households is balance, not the staples themselves: the 2022 Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis found that about 62% of an average household’s calories come from starchy staples.[11]

TRY THIS Build each plate in three parts: a staple (rice, yam, garri or bread), a protein (beans, fish, egg or meat) and a generous portion of vegetables.

QUESTION 8 · THE NIGERIAN PLATE

Do yam and cassava count as my vegetables?

MYTH	Yam, cassava and potatoes count towards my five a day.
FACT	**WHO’s target of at least 400 g (five portions) of fruit and vegetables a day excludes potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava and other starchy roots.**[8]

Starchy roots are useful energy foods, but they belong with the staples rather than the vegetables.[8] Nigeria’s guidelines encourage a wide variety of foods and liberal amounts of whatever fruit is in season.[10] WHO also advises at least 25 g of naturally occurring fibre a day for adults.[8]

TRY THIS Add a vegetable to every meal, such as ugu, tomatoes, okra, carrots or garden eggs, and keep seasonal fruit where you can see it.

QUESTION 9 · THE NIGERIAN PLATE

Do I really need fibre, and are beans worth eating?

MYTH	Fibre only matters for digestion.
FACT	**WHO-commissioned reviews linked higher fibre intake with roughly 15–30% lower rates of all-cause and heart-related death, plus less type 2 diabetes and bowel cancer.**[12]

The reviews pooled 185 prospective studies and 58 clinical trials, with the greatest protection at about 25–29 g of fibre a day.[12] WHO’s own recommendation is at least 25 g of naturally occurring fibre a day.[8] Most of this evidence is observational, so it shows strong links rather than proof of cause.[12] Legumes such as beans are among the foods Nigeria’s guidelines encourage.[10]

TRY THIS Add beans or lentils to a meal you already eat, and choose oats, brown rice or whole-wheat bread more often.

QUESTION 10 · THE NIGERIAN PLATE

Is suya or other red meat bad for me?

MYTH	Meat is either completely safe or completely dangerous.
FACT	**WHO's cancer agency classes processed meat as carcinogenic (Group 1) and red meat as probably carcinogenic (Group 2A), and the risk rises with the amount eaten.**[13]

IARC found that each 50 g portion of processed meat eaten daily raises the risk of colorectal cancer by about 18%.[13] Red meat means fresh mammalian muscle meat such as beef, pork, lamb and goat (suya is usually beef); the evidence for it is limited, and some studies linked well-done or pan-fried meat to higher risk.[13] The groups describe how strong the evidence is, not how large the risk is, so processed meat sharing a group with smoking does not mean it is equally dangerous.[13] Nigeria's guidelines advise limiting fat from animal foods and eating meat, fish, eggs and dairy in moderation.[10]

TRY THIS Enjoy suya as an occasional treat rather than a daily habit, and balance your week with fish, beans and eggs.

QUESTION 11 · THE NIGERIAN PLATE

Does it matter if food is "ultra-processed" when the calories are the same?

MYTH	Calories are calories, so the type of food doesn't matter.
FACT	**In a controlled NIH trial, people ate about 508 more calories a day on an ultra-processed diet, even though the menus were matched for calories, sugar, fat, fibre and sodium as displayed.**[14]

Twenty adults lived at the NIH Clinical Center for 28 days, eating ultra-processed meals for two weeks and minimally processed meals for two weeks.[14] On the ultra-processed diet they ate faster, gained about 0.9 kg, and lost about the same on the unprocessed diet.[14] It was a small, short study, so it shows a mechanism rather than long-term outcomes.[14] WHO describes minimally processed foods low in unhealthy fats, free sugars and sodium as the foundation of a healthy diet.[8]

TRY THIS Swap one packaged item a day for a closer-to-nature version: instant noodles for rice, beans and vegetables, or a packaged snack for groundnuts and an orange.

CHAPTER 4

Fat, Sugar, Salt and Water

QUESTION 12 · FAT, SUGAR, SALT & WATER

Is all fat bad for me?

MYTH	Fat makes you fat, so the less I eat, the better.
FACT	**WHO advises keeping total fat to 30% of energy or less, saturated fat under 10% and trans fat under 1%, and favouring unsaturated fats.**[8]

Adults need some fat: WHO says at least 15% of daily energy should come from it.[8] Saturated fats are found in meat, butter, palm oil and coconut oil, while unsaturated fats are found in fish, avocado, nuts and most plant oils.[15] The advice is to shift towards unsaturated fats and to avoid industrially produced trans fats.[8]

TRY THIS Measure oil rather than pouring it freely, grill or boil fish more often than frying, and add groundnuts or avocado for healthier fats.

QUESTION 13 · FAT, SUGAR, SALT & WATER

Is the sugar in fruit as bad as the sugar in soft drinks?

MYTH	Sugar is sugar, so fruit is as bad as soda.
FACT	**WHO's limit is on free sugars: added sugars plus sugars in honey, syrups and fruit juice. Whole fruit counts towards the 400 g a day target instead.**[8]

WHO recommends keeping free sugars below 10% of daily energy, about 50 g (12 teaspoons) on a 2,000-calorie diet, with below 5% (about 25 g) giving extra benefit.[8,15] Because juice counts as free sugar, a glass of packaged juice or a sweetened drink uses up your allowance far faster than a whole orange.[15]

TRY THIS Swap soft drinks, malt drinks and sweetened zobo or yoghurt for water or unsweetened options, and eat fruit whole.

QUESTION 14 · FAT, SUGAR, SALT & WATER

Do seasoning cubes count as salt?

MYTH	Stew cubes are just flavouring, so they don't count.
FACT	**WHO lists bouillon and stock cubes among the ways salt gets into food. The limit for adults is under 5 g of salt (about one teaspoon) a day.**[8]

Most people eat far more: WHO puts the average at 9–12 g of salt a day.[8] High salt intake raises blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart disease and stroke, and WHO says cutting salt to the recommended level could prevent 1.7 million deaths each year.[8] Nigeria's guidelines also advise limiting salt, bouillon cubes and sugar.[10]

TRY THIS Use fewer cubes, taste before adding salt, and lean on onions, peppers and herbs for flavour.

QUESTION 15 · FAT, SUGAR, SALT & WATER

Do I have to drink eight glasses of water a day?

MYTH	Everyone needs eight glasses (about 2 litres) of water every day.
FACT	**A study of more than 5,600 people found that daily water needs vary widely with activity, climate, body size and age, and that part of your water comes from food.**[16,17]

Researchers measured how much water people actually used each day (called water turnover) and found daily averages ranging from about 1 to 6 litres.[16,17] Physical activity and athletic status explained the biggest share of the differences, followed by sex, national development level and age.[17] Athletes used about a litre more than non-athletes, and hot, humid weather raised water use.[17] The study did not set a new guideline.[17]

TRY THIS Instead of counting glasses, drink to thirst, and drink more in hot weather or when you sweat from exercise or outdoor work.

A QUICK WORD ON THE EVIDENCE

Some findings here come from strong designs, such as randomised trials and Cochrane reviews of them.[1,4] Others, including the fibre and red-meat findings, are observational: they show consistent links, not proof of cause.[12,13] The NIH food trial was small (20 adults) and short (four weeks).[14] The fasting reviews covered studies of up to six months.[4] Nigeria's food-based dietary guidelines were published in 2001, so we pair them with newer WHO guidance.[8,10] Individual needs differ; people with diabetes, kidney disease, digestive conditions or allergies should consult a registered dietitian before major changes.

This guide is for general education and inspiration. It is not medical advice and does not replace care from a licensed clinician or registered dietitian. Talk with your healthcare provider before making significant changes to your diet, activity or routines, especially if you are pregnant, managing a health condition, or taking medication.

SOURCES

References & Further Reading

Every number in this guide traces back to the sources below. Superscript numbers in the text match the numbered entries. Where a finding comes from observational research (which shows association, not proof of cause), we say so.

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17. University of Wisconsin–Madison. Stop counting cups. There's an ocean of difference in our water needs. 24 November 2022. news.wisc.edu

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

- WHO Healthy diet fact sheet: who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet
- FAO, Food-based dietary guidelines for Nigeria: fao.org/nutrition (Nigeria country page)
- NHS Live Well, Healthy weight: nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight
- CDC, Healthy Weight and Growth: cdc.gov/healthy-weight-growth
- For personal advice, find a registered dietitian or speak to your doctor.