

# SportsNutrition

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## The Athlete's Kitchen

As I write this article, I'm watching *The Biggest Loser* on TV. Many people have been asking my opinion of this popular show, so I feel obliged to scream out: *It's terrible! It's horrible! It's abusive!* I also feel like throwing my shoe at the TV. Here's why—

The messages in *The Biggest Loser* are all about deprivation, denial, starvation, and punishment. Exercise is akin to torture. Food is the fattening enemy. The participants use sheer willpower to white-knuckle themselves through each grueling day. They are praised if they lose ten pounds in a week (as if they are now better people), scorned if they lose only two (as if they are scum of the earth), and ridiculed if the scale barely moves. The participants get no credit for having inner beauty that shines from the inside out, nor do they get treated as if they are decent people with tender feelings. The scale is the sole judge of their worthiness.

Right now on the TV, one contestant is yelling at another one for having failed to lose enough weight for their team to stay in the contest. It's an ugly segment, as if the successful loser is superior to the other one. I doubt that. Being able to endure starvation is not a sign of superiority.

Now, another contestant is getting applauded and praised for having lost an outrageous amount of weight—14 pounds in a week. Everyone thinks that is just great, as if man is now a success. Yes, he might be fitter and healthier, but losing weight does not make anyone a better father, son, mother, or daughter. Same person, same problems.

What happens in the long run, when the Biggest Losers return to the real world with no personal trainer to snap the whip, with no pre-made, pre-portioned food, and no "fat camp" dedicated to full time weight loss? Inevitably, without rigid vigilance, the weight will return with a vengeance. The physiological response to starvation is to overcompensate (commonly known as "binge eating" or "blowing the diet"). This desire to over-eat has little to do with willpower and lots to do with physiology. Just as a person gasps for air if oxygen has been withheld, the same person will grab for carbs if food has been withheld.

The unfortunate message perpetuated by *The Biggest Loser* is "eating is cheating." False. Eating satisfies a physiological requirement for food. Just as people need to sleep, urinate, and breathe, they also need to fuel their bodies, ideally with appropriate portions of healthful foods. Yet, you don't need to eat a "perfect" diet to have a good diet. There's little harm in enjoying a slice of pizza or piece of birthday cake. The E in eating should stand for Enjoyment, not for Excruciating hunger.

The E in Exercise should also stand for Enjoyment. When exercise feels like punishment for having undesirable body fat, the day will come when that dieter no longer feels like

## The Biggest Loser TV Contest: A Big Loser

whipping his or her body into shape and instead reverts to lazing on the couch. The Biggest Losers lose-out in the long run, because extreme diets (either on TV or in your life) teach nothing about *sustainable* eating and exercise practices that can be enjoyably maintained for the rest of one's life. What about moderation, balance, quality of life?

So how does a person lose undesired body fat? Not by dieting! We know that diets do *not* work. If diets did work, then every person who has ever been on a diet would be lean. We know from research that students who dieted in middle school still struggled with weight in high school. None of their efforts to lose weight resulted in the desired outcome. Rather, diets linked with hunger, denial & deprivation of favorite foods set the stage for binge eating and weight gain. Hence, the question arises: Do diets *contribute* to the obesity problem? Perhaps. The first 6 months of food restriction tend to result in fat loss. But then, the fat generally creeps back (if not rapidly returns)—plus more.

It's time to take a different look at how to lose weight. A new task force on obesity suggests people chip away at losing undesired body fat by eating just 100 calories less/day (and for non-exercisers, moving 100 calories more). This contrasts to the Biggest Loser approach of skimping on breakfast, nibbling on salad for lunch, and exercising exhaustively on fumes—all unsustainable efforts that require enduring extreme hunger. How about eating just a little bit less at the end of the day: two fewer Oreos, one less can of soda pop, a smaller snack while watching TV? Trade-in grueling workouts to burn off calories for meaningful ways to move your body: training for a fun event, biking to work, playing with the kids, running with a friend. The rigor of hard training can lose its glow even for athletes; they need rest days and an "off season."

*Food for thought:* I repeat: Eating is not cheating! The trick to losing weight is to learn how to eat appropriately—a difficult task in an obesity-producing society. A sports dietitian can help you create a personalized food plan that embraces food as one of life's pleasures. You can find this weight management expert on [SCANdpg.org](http://SCANdpg.org)'s referral network.

People who eat appropriately tend to be thin; dieters tend to be heavy. Clearly, the eating approach to weight management paves the road to success! To manage to eat wisely, we need to learn how to manage stress, get enough sleep, exercise our bodies enjoyably, and take care of our souls. Curiously, this self-care has little to do with food...

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