**Definition:** Diet, to from *Dictionary of Food: International Food and Cooking Terms from A to Z*

To control the intake of food in general or of particular types of food usually with a view to losing weight but sometimes for other medical or health reasons, e.g. for coeliac disease and diabetes

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**Summary Article: Dieting**

*From Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*

*Dieting* is the practice of intentionally limiting food intake. Although some diets are undertaken for increased athletic performance or routine religious observance, dieting is primarily thought of as a mechanism for weight loss. Dieting has increased in popularity in the United States throughout the 20th century, as food has become routinely available and aesthetic body preferences have privileged slenderness. Sociological analyses have frequently examined the relationship between dieting and gender, which is a highly gendered phenomenon: most dieters are women and the majority of women report high levels of body dissatisfaction. More recently, as described in this entry, sociologists have begun to examine connections between dieting culture and the multibillion-dollar dieting industry.

**The Development of Dieting**

Dieting is conventionally understood as either an aesthetic activity aimed at reducing body weight or as a health activity aimed at improving physiological health conditions. In the earliest reports of dieting that date back to Greek Antiquity and early Christianity, however, the practice was portrayed as a moral task. The philosopher Aristotle claimed that unrestrained eating interfered with the search for an honorable, truth-seeking life. Early Christianity similarly portrayed dieting and fasting as body purification rituals: deeply religious individuals could avoid the sins of greed or gluttony through restraining their food consumption and, consequently, become closer to God. Dieting was an atypical action during these times. The few people who were likely to engage in dieting as part of larger religious or philosophical crusades were also likely to be members of elite groups. Further, they were likely to be in the enviable and rare position of having excess food to turn away from.

For most human history and in most places, the average person has not had sufficient access to food. Rather than facing the moral burden of debating the merits of large meals versus piety or enlightenment, most people have had to continually struggle to alleviate their body’s hunger. People frequently and successfully met their daily calorie needs through farming and animal care; such success has been mitigated, though, by the appearance of famines, natural disasters, and food-tainting epidemics. Governments, religious authorities, property owner/managers, and other powerful groups have also been able to effectively control food dispersal.

In countries and in periods where food has been scarce, groups that have had dependable access to food have also had access to social power. Regular access to inadequate foodstuffs has indicated high social status; highly ranked people have been better able to acquire food and their bodies are, frequently, taller and heavier than are those of their lower-class counterparts. During these times, fatness has been positively lauded as a robust and attractive demonstration of wealth. Alternately,
fatness has been occasionally decried as a symbol of overindulgence and greed during times of food shortages; however, it is rare for people with insufficient food resources to engage in willful dieting.

Food supplies grew tremendously during the 19th and 20th centuries, especially within North America and Western Europe, because of a number of factors: the industrialization and mechanization of agriculture, improvements in refrigeration and food preservation, and improvements in food transportation and disbursement. Each of these innovations has helped to make food widely and routinely available. As the food supply has grown sharply, people have been able to meet their food needs easily and affordably. Furthermore, the transition to industrial and postindustrial work has lessened bodies’ calorie needs. The average person's body size has grown as a consequence of these social changes. The large body size that had been a symbol of rare wealth became increasingly common, and the high status of large bodies soon faded. This changing conception of socially preferred body types was exemplified by the 1863 publication of England’s first popular diet book, William Banting’s A Letter on Corpulence.

Aesthetic Body and Health Ideals

The relatively new preference for trim bodies has not been a universal goal of all Westerners. Indeed, although trim bodies have been increasingly socially desirable in the past 150 years, this body type has been especially embraced as a beauty ideal both by and for white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Beauty norms aimed at—and often embraced by—these women conflate thinness with physical attractiveness. Such aesthetic standards are frequently internalized as personal goals that require regular dieting to attain an ever-thinner cultural ideal. In the last decades of the 20th-century, athletic fitness joined slenderness as a body goal for white women—social ideals assert that women should be both strong and slim.

Throughout the 20th century, alternate body weight ideals and goals have existed for other groups of women. However, recent evidence indicates that slimmer, trimmer body ideals are increasingly dominant regardless of race, gender, and sexuality status. For instance, Chicana/Latina and African American women typically have lower rates of dieting than do white women and profess higher levels of body satisfaction. The embrace of a large posterior (“booty”) is further evidence of alternate body size norms. However, some recent studies have indicated that Chicana/Latina and African American women are under increased pressure to become slim. Similarly, lesbian and bisexual women in the United States report less pressure to meet beauty standards; they are more likely to decry fat stigmatization and disavow less extreme ideal weights. However, many lesbian and bisexual women still find extremely high weights problematic.

Feminist sociologists have regularly noted that the media idealizes the weight standards and bodywork practices of white, heterosexual women. Furthermore, the media depicts whiteness, heterosexuality, and slenderness as beauty goals for all women. Women who do not meet this cultural ideal are often held in lower esteem than are their counterparts. Most women differ from the archetype; more than 60 percent of U.S. women are classified as overweight. Regardless of women's actual appearance, more than 75 percent of women habitually report personal body dissatisfaction and more than 84 percent report having dieted at some point in their lives.

Men have been largely exempted from the social demand for slim bodies. Instead, men's body ideals center on the goals of increased musculature, strength, and fitness. Men diet less frequently than women, and when men do start an organized diet, they are typically much heavier than their female
counterparts. Heterosexual men who diet primarily cite health-improvement motives rather than slimness for the sake of beauty; this is seen among men of varying racial groups. Homosexual men are more likely to additionally cite aesthetics a motivational factor for weight loss. Although, on average, men are less likely than women to feel pressure to be slim, more than 30 percent of men report body dissatisfaction and 58 percent report having previously dieted.

Regardless of social location, the thin body is often assumed to be a healthy body. Whether thin bodies are athletic or sedentary, slenderness is frequently conflated with good health. This attitude is exemplified through the extensive use of the weight-based body mass index (BMI). Individuals who are "overweight" according to BMI are frequently advised by physicians and diet programs to lose weight to improve health. As a result, the heavy body is often depicted as unhealthy, unvalued, unattractive, and, sometimes, diseased. The portrayal of fatness as a medical and aesthetic failure helps to both create and reinforce fat stigmatization. This, in turn, influences many people to watch their bodies continually and diet persistently. There are, however, pro-fat social movement organizations, such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, that function as a small countermovement to obesity prejudice.

**Diets and the Diet Industry**

In conjunction with the heightened importance of the slim body and increased body dissatisfaction, dieting has become increasingly common. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control found that 34 percent of men and 48 percent of women reported dieting in 2001 and 2002. A wide variety of diets—both homespun and corporate—have risen in response to individuals' desire to slim the body. And, like other culinary and social trends, different diets have grown and receded in popularity. For instance, in the 1930s, the Hollywood Diet, also known as the Grapefruit Diet, recommended eating half of a grapefruit with each meal. This diet declined in use during the mid-century and reappeared in the 1970s. Other noteworthy diets fads include the Scarsdale Diet in the 1970s, the Cabbage Soup Diet in 1996, and the Blood Type Diet and Zone Diet in the 1990s. The South Beach Diet and the Atkins Diet, which advocate a low-carbohydrate, high protein intake, enjoyed widespread success in the early 2000s; even fast-food restaurants joined the craze by selling bun-less, low-carbohydrate burgers.

In addition to personal diet plans, a number of for-profit dieting programs arose during the 20th century, including Weight Watchers, Slim-Fast, and Jenny Craig. These companies assert that dieters should follow a corporate program to lose weight most effectively. And, if all of that does not work, a variety of prescription and nonprescription diet pills have cropped up since the 1950s to "aid" dieters. These pills have sometimes contained amphetamines or have been associated with extreme side effects: the popular drug Fen-Phen was discontinued in 1997 for its association with increased occurrences of heart disease and hypertension, and the dietary supplement Ephedra was prohibited in 2003 for raising blood pressure and stressing the circulatory system. Although these pills have been taken off the market, new diet medications, such as Meridia and TRIMSPA, have taken their place. Collectively, the diet industry is worth more than $40 billion. This wealth is particularly interesting when contrasted with the long-term success of diets: between just 5 percent and 20 percent of dieters are able to successfully reach their goals and keep their newly slender physiques.

**Sociological Examinations of Dieting**

Sociological examinations of dieting have frequently looked at the extent to which girls and women, compared with boys and men, become anxious about their body weight and engage in dieting behavior.

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More recently, sociologists and other social scientists have debated dieting meanings and asked if dieting can ever be a feminist activity. At the root of many sociological examinations is the question of whether dieting, as a primarily female activity, reinforces unattainable ideals of women’s slenderness. Finally, sociologists have begun examining the connection between the for-profit weight loss industry and individuals’ dieting behavior.

See also
Body Image; Cosmetic Surgery; Eating Disorders; Exercise and Fitness

Further Readings

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