

Can Smoothies and Shakes Help with Weight Loss?

There's no question that weight loss and dieting are frustrating experiences for many of us. We may succeed with one approach, only to fail — and for the weight to come back — over time. This is part of why the diet and nutrition industry is a multi-billion-dollar big business, yet there is still no "magic bullet" in sight.

What is a meal replacement smoothie?

One key part in the diet industry is the concept of the "meal replacement" shake or smoothie. This is hardly a new concept in dieting — it's been around for decades in the form of SlimFast, NutriSystem, and other brands. However, it has grown more sophisticated in its makeup and marketing through the years.

The idea behind these shakes is simple: To lose weight, replace a meal or two a day with one of these shakes with fewer calories. It's both convenient to prepare and a simple way to lose weight since it has fewer calories than the meal it replaces. Ideally, it should also contain plenty of protein, fiber, and other healthy nutrients to give your body what it needs for nutrition.

Many health organizations take a similar approach: Using meal replacement shakes and smoothies may help you with weight loss in the short term, but they are not a viable long-term strategy for losing weight and keeping it off over time.

Elizabeth Ferrer, RD, a clinical dietitian with the University of Miami Health System, however, takes a softer, arguably more realistic stance. She sees meal replacement smoothies and shakes as a viable method for losing weight and often recommends

them to her patients for three to six months to help kickstart their weight loss journeys.

"As long as the shakes have a good composition of macronutrients, I think there is a good place for them in the modern diet," she says. "They often have fewer calories than a full meal, so they're effective at helping you lose weight. And they're certainly more convenient than preparing an entire meal."

What's in your smoothie?

The key is making sure your meal replacement smoothie of choice has a good nutrient profile. Ferrer recommends between 20 and 30 grams of protein, 3 to 5 grams of fiber, and 2 grams of sugar or less. Don't be fooled by shakes or smoothies that try to add even more than 30 grams of protein, she says. "There's actually a limit of how much protein your body can absorb at a time."

Replace the meal, don't just add to it



As far as which meal you replace, Ferrer says it is a matter of personal preference. Some people may find it more convenient to have a shake for breakfast, while others may drink their shake for dinner. Ferrer says that the important thing for weight

loss is to use the shake or smoothie as an actual meal replacement rather than an addition.

"What else you are eating throughout the day also matters," she says. "You have to make sure you get enough energy and nutrients from other foods. One of those meals is replaced, but the other two must be nutritious and well-balanced."

Grilled chicken salad, anyone?

One criticism that often gets lobbied at these shakes and smoothies is that they are not a long-term solution. However, Ferrer has seen many of her patients succeed in transitioning from the shakes to a more standard diet and maintaining a healthy weight.

"I try to coach my patients on how they need to eat coming off the shakes, so they'll be satisfied without overconsuming calories," she says.

"The key is lots of filling fruits and vegetables paired with lean sources of protein like chicken, fish, turkey, nuts, and seeds. I find that a salad with grilled chicken is often a good place to start."

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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