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Social Media Influence on Adolescents’ Diets

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Social media, with its enormous amount of users from all platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, consumers are being exposed to more than trending viral videos. Recently, there has been a huge peak in fad diets trending on these newsfeeds; diets claiming that one can lose thirty pounds in two months, or taking a supplement a day will shrink and tighten your tummy in no time. However, young adults should thoroughly research, or speak with their doctor, before attempting various diets often promoted on social media by unconventional experts.

There is nothing new about the paleo diet, as the diet was actually introduced in a book back in 1975, and it has been trending in popularity since 2014 (Richman, 2016). It also has become a hot topic for good reasons, such as more energy, reduced inflammation, reduced fatigue, improved blood sugar, clearer skin, and less bloating (Kadey, 2019). Although these may seem like perfect reasons to jump into the paleo diet, the way this diet is presented on social media is often times misinterpreted. The results of this diet on social media are regularly self-reported benefits by individual interpretation, and generally, research evidence and doctor recommendations are ignored (Andrikopoulos, 2016).

The diet is based on foods that would have been similar to the diet of our ancestors who hunted and gathered food during the Paleolithic era (Kadey, 2018). The focus foods of this diet are fish, meat, veggies, fruit, nuts, and seeds. Eliminating processed foods, artificial ingredients, dairy, refined sugar, grains, and anything that does not come from the earth (Richman, 2016). The premise is that modern diets are much different than those of our ancestors. Due to the
introduction of new foods that were absent during the Paleolithic era, there has not been enough

time for our bodies to adapt or evolve to modern food. For this reason, it causes our bodies to not

function as well as it did 10,000 years ago (Kadey, 2018).

Paleo is a great diet for excluding processed foods from your diet that usually contain

high levels of sugar and grains. Which in turn, can help with higher protein intake, less

over-eating, and building lean body mass (Kadey, 2019). It is known to help reduce your risk of
diseases such as heart disease and diabetes, since the diet is shown to improve blood sugar control (Kadey, 2019).

However, when eliminating things like dairy and grains, it leaves the body without

certain types of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants (Kadey, 2019). These dietary needs can lead
to a risk of dietary deficiencies if not substituted correctly to get the proper amount needed for your body. Furthermore, without grains, it may be hard to power through a workout when lacking the proper amount of carbohydrates if living a very active lifestyle (Kadey, 2018).

The paleo diet may be sustainable for some, but it is not for everyone. It is important to check to see if you’re getting the appropriate amount of nutrients with the paleo diet. If living an active lifestyle, it is essential to eat enough fruit and veggies with carbohydrates to fuel a workout (Kadey, 2019). Similar to most diets, listening to your dietician can help determine if this diet works best for you (Kadey, 2019).

While the paleo diet has become a widely popular internet fad, one of the internet's newest upcoming diets is called the ketogenic diet, or the “keto” diet. This diet focuses on low-carb and high-fat foods which is said to send your body into ketosis, essentially burning fat instead of glucose. While this can work for many people, it is not the most sustainable diet for
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long-term goals. This is where the diet influences adolescents. They claim that this diet is ideal for quick weight loss, therefore making it what appeals most to this age group. “Quick weight loss is why many health experts are concerned about people on the keto diet, especially those who try it without the guidance of a doctor or nutritionist” (MacMillan, 2018, p.1).

The keto diet, works for most people who research if this diet is adequate with their body and will give them the benefits they are looking for. Unfortunately, this is not the process adolescents go through to see if this specific diet works. They rely on their favorite influencers or their favorite social media platform for advice. “Not only do messages of food serve a symbolic purpose in these online platforms, but this communication might also affect adolescents in both positive and negative ways in regards to health” (Holmberg, 2018).

There are minimal positive effects of the keto diet for those who do not perform their research. Adolescents who complete their research and meet with a professional about what will work for their body type end up experiencing the best possible results. Some of these benefits are helpful for those who have a sedentary lifestyle which “are all too common a factor often dictated by desk jobs or long work hours” (Team Cellucor, 2018, pg.1). Another benefit includes reset insulin sensitivity which essentially “helps boost your sensitivity to insulin, ensuring you can safely reintroduce carbohydrates at a later stage at no cost to physique or performance” (Team Cellucor). The last benefit recorded is that the diet can help you lose body fat. This happens “when you strip away the body’s main source of energy (carbohydrates), it is forced to adapt by using body fat for fuel” (Team Cellucor). All of these benefits may be factors that adolescents are interested in, but with the right research and feedback from a professional, will give them the best results.
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However, there are the things that unconventional experts and influencers do not mention in their opinions of this diet. The “keto flu” is one of the major drawbacks of this diet. When people go through this “flu”, the body begins to react negatively, and begins to feel like it has the influenza virus. “That happens because your body runs out of sugar to burn for energy, and it has to start using fat” (MacMillan, 2018, p.1). Another negative is weight regain, and this happens when the dieter gains all the weight they have lost once they re-incorporate carbohydrates into their diet (MacMillan, 2018). “Because the keto diet is so restrictive, health experts say it is not an appropriate diet to follow long-term” (MacMillan, 2018, p.1). The last negative and the most important is that this particular diet can cause an “increased risk of heart disease and diabetes” (MacMillan, 2018, p.1). Some professionals have claimed the keto diet is a “cardiologist’s nightmare” because high-fat diets increase cholesterol levels which in turn increases the risk of diabetes (MacMillan, 2018). A study was conducted in the Lancet, found that people who followed low-carb diets are at higher risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and early death (MacMillan, 2018).

All of these positives and negative items, can still occur, even with the proper research and feedback from doctors. Adolescents need to understand that there are negatives with these “fad diets” and should not rely solely on social media and influencers for their research and opinions.

While the keto and paleo diets only scratch the surface of the many popular diets found through social media platforms, there are also products such as simple as apple cider vinegar that adolescents will use as a daily supplement for weight loss.
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Apple cider vinegar (ACV) does in fact have health benefits ranging from helping diabetes or lowering blood pressure. One study showed “that apples and derived products are a source of polyphenols, the source of B and C vitamins, calcium, potassium phosphorus, and fiber, with antioxidant properties that reduce the risk of developing tumors, hypertension, diabetes, heart disease and brain aging” (Bogdanescu, D., et. al. 2017, 159-164). Many studies capitalize how “consuming ACV after a meal can block digestion of starches that spike blood sugar, which then lowers cravings” (Palmer, S., 2016).

Nonetheless, the average consumer should not jump to conclusions for this hyped-up trend because this product is not for the everyday social media enthusiast, and can actually be harmful without the proper research. In the article, Harvard Men’s Health Watch (2018), Dr. William Kormos contradicts the “hyped-up” benefits of ACV. He claims “as with so many dietary fads, apple cider vinegar has seen its share of health claims with little medical evidence to support them. These studies focus on reduction in blood sugar levels and weight loss, but these have been small, short-term trials or animal studies” (Kormos 2018). In the Franziska Spritzler (2016) article, 7 Side effects of Too Much Apple Cider Vinegar, Spritzler touches on how ACV can cause “erosion of tooth enamel, throat burns, skin burns, and drug interactions” (Spritzler, F., 2019).

These diets would not be considered a “fad” without the help of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In some form or fashion, these platforms are showcasing weight loss in a simple way through non-conventional experts and unreliable sources. While not all the information is inaccurate, the improper use of these diets and supplements can lead to a rise in health issues that can be prevented.
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The Keto/Paleo diets along with apple cider vinegar intake have been an adolescents’ go-to for rapid weight loss, a new remedy has arisen in form of detox teas. These teas can be seen advertised by influencers and have become a popular and fast way to lose unwanted weight by cleansing the body from “toxins.” Toxins include pesticides, antibiotics and hormones in food” (Wong, & Fogoros, 2018).

The word detox comes from detoxification and is the body’s natural way of eliminating toxins. The term was originally used or “primarily thought of as a treatment for alcohol and drug dependence” (Wong, & Fogoros, 2018). Recently, it has been redefined and commonly recognized as a short-term diet that claims to remove toxins and, in turn, have weight-loss affects. These diets typically include the following: “emphasis on foods that provide the vitamins, nutrients, and antioxidants that the body needs for detoxification. Emphasis on foods with fiber, and water that increase bowel movements and urination. Although there are not many studies out there, some “studies have shown that commercial detox diets enhance liver detoxification and eliminate persistent organic pollutants from the body” (Klein, & Kiat, 2015).

It does not come as a surprise on why this diet appeals to consumers as a popular way to lose weight. This persuades them to believe they are creating a healthier lifestyle by eliminating unwanted toxins from their bodies’.

With “weight loss being a $66 billion dollar industry, and one of the most advertised, according to the American Council on Science and Health” (Johnson, 2018). Adolescents are often finding “fad diets” and other health information through social media. In the United States, up to 90% of teenagers and young adults report using Facebook, whereas more than half use Instagram and one-third use Twitter (Carrotte, Vella, & Lim, 2015). These platforms are playing
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a big role in reaching adolescents through popular influencers who advertise detox teas. It becomes easier and easier to target consumers through social media as technology only continues to evolve.

As mentioned before, fad diets promote quick and easy weight loss promises, but have certain aspects that are often overlooked causing some negative effects. Without further research, individuals will not know that some of these fad diets involve eliminating food with necessary nutrients and affect everyone differently. “The main health risks of detox diets relate to severe energy restriction and nutritional inadequacy” (Klein, & Kiat, 2015). “Despite these concerns, 42% of American adult social media users have reported that information found via social media would affect health decisions related to diet, exercise, or stress management, and nearly 90% of people aged 18 to 24 years have indicated they would trust medical information found on social media” (Carrotte, Vella, & Lim, 2015). However, with these various methods of detox, there can be positive and negative results based on the amount of research performed.

**Young adults should thoroughly research, or speak with their doctor, before attempting various diets often promoted on social media by unconventional experts.**

Doctors and dieticians urge adolescents and anyone trying to find a new diet to get professional advice on what works best for your body which is unique to only you. Social media platforms and influencers do not always show a full picture of these trending diets and it is beneficial to understand the importance and details beyond what is shown.
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References


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