Dear Alice,

I’ve been trying to diet for over two years. My goal is to lose about 25 pounds, but the most I’ve been able to get is 15, and I can hardly keep it off. I concentrate on eating very little and since exercise is so hard to keep up, I pretty much starve myself to death. I manage to maintain the weight for a month, and then I lose control again. I've been thinking about the various diet products in the market, such as diet teas, herbs, meal-substitution shakes, and other medical products. I’d like to know what kind of side-effects they have, and how effective they are. (Some boast a seven-day plan, but that seems hardly believable.) Also, I'd like to know how well-researched the information is on these products (i.e., are they long-term enough to cover all the side-effects?) As for aspartame, is it really harmless, or is it just not researched yet?

? Trying to Diet

Answer

Dear Trying to Diet,

Let’s start with aspartame. Despite controversy over its potential health risks, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) maintains that aspartame is a safe sugar substitute. There is one exception: people with phenylketonuria (PKU) should avoid aspartame because it contains phenylalanine, an amino acid that’s difficult to metabolize for people with this condition. A large body of research also refutes the claim that aspartame increases the risk of cancer.

When it comes to diet products, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is! There are no miracles or secrets to thinness out there, so be wary of diet fads and gimmicks that want to sell you a "quick fix." Some diets and weight-loss products are more effective or more risky than others, so you may want to check out the specific reviews in the Related Q&As. It takes commitment and willpower to lose weight the old-fashioned way, through healthy eating and regular exercise, but these habits will keep you fit and firm for the long haul. Here are some tried-and-true tips for good nutrition and fitness to help you safely lose weight and improve your overall health:

- Set realistic weight loss goals (perhaps you've already reached a good weight for your
• Ditch diets in favor of consistent, healthy eating and exercise habits.
• Listen to your body (i.e., eat when you feel hungry and stop when you feel full).
• Feel free to treat yourself once in a while.
• Avoid extremes like starving and out-of-control bingeing.
• Aim for moderation - both in terms of calorie intake and exercise.

Before making any changes in your diet or exercise routine, it's smart to talk with a health care provider or a registered dietician. The provider can answer questions about food and exercise, and help you design a plan that meets your needs.

To get the skinny on healthier eating and exercise topics, you may want to peruse the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity archive. Here's to doing away with diets!

Alice!
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Weight Gain & Loss

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