



# Weight programs spruik new path to health



## **THE DIET DILEMMA** JILL STARK

A NEW year: a new you. It's the diet industry's perennial catch cry.

As obesity rates continue to climb, weight-loss companies are rebranding their message.

While reaching your "goal weight" was once the slimmer's holy grail, success is now being redefined.

Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers say it's no longer about shedding all your excess kilograms and fitting into that summer bikini – it's about getting healthy.

Drop as little as 5 per cent of your body weight and you can reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

And there is now acknowledgement that it may take repeated attempts at their programs to see results.

Weight management is being sold as a "life service" – a disclosure that would once have been anathema to an industry built on the lure of the quick fix.

But while some health profession-

als have welcomed the move towards greater transparency, others fear that the slimming world is moving backwards by legitimising yo-yo dieting – a habit that has been linked to increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and metabolic disorders.

Repeated cycles of weight loss and weight gain can lower the body's metabolic rate, making it harder to burn calories when normal eating patterns are resumed.

"What concerns me is the idea that it's normal to go up and down in your weight," dietitian Rosemary Stanton said. "A new study a few weeks ago showed that from a health perspective, people who repeatedly lose weight and put it back on would have been better off staying fat."

Stanton, who was once a consultant for Weight Watchers until it became "too commercial", also questions if it and other weight-loss companies are now more focused on

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getting customers to buy their range of convenience foods than helping people slim down. This was creating dependent consumers and not attacking the real problems of diet and obesity, she said.

Jenny Craig chief executive Amy Smith dismisses the criticisms, and says the shift in its marketing message is not an admission of failure, but recognition of how hard it is to lose weight and keep it off.

"You have to look at it as a life service. It's like taking your car in once a year for a tune-up. Some people will come back several times, but we have to accept on the basis of the statistics – a third of Australian adults and a quarter of our children are overweight – that weight loss isn't a straight line; there are humps and bumps along the way. That doesn't mean people attempting it who experience [weight] regain have failed. So in that sense, yes, we have reframed the marketing of what success means."

Stanton says the medical profession has also moved away from "target weight" as the ultimate goal for those trying to shed excess fat.

With increasing evidence that even modest weight loss in very heavy people can be beneficial, she believes it's not surprising the industry has followed suit.

"It probably reflects the fact that people are now not just a few kilos overweight, but a high percentage of Australians are obese or morbidly obese. I think the weight-loss companies are starting to see that there's so many of those people that they have to adapt their message to to make the goal more attainable."

By adopting a more realistic approach to weight loss, Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers maintain they set themselves apart from the "charlatans" that thrive in a \$790-million-a-year diet industry notorious for spruiking unsubstantiated methods to achieve "miracle transformations".

As countless Australians prepare to fight the festive flab, these companies say their focus on peer support, lifestyle change and nutritional education will give them a better chance of losing

weight than if they opt for a fad diet, pill or shake.

This positioning, along with scientific evidence that the programs offer relatively good results, has seen sectors of the medical community begin to embrace their programs as a potential pillar of the obesity solution.

Weight Watchers, backed by the Weight Management Council – a collaboration of health professionals and weight-loss companies including Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers, which aims to improve standards in the industry and protect consumers from shonky diet products – this month lobbied the federal government for \$115 million to allow publicly funded access to the programs.

The size of the business – one in three Australian women has attended a Weight Watchers meeting – makes it a more cost-effective approach, they argued, than people attending individual dietitians.

They pointed to a 2011 *Lancet* study, which found that overweight and obese adults in Australia, Germany and Britain who were given a year's Weight Watchers membership, lost twice as much weight as another group who were treated by GPs.

Jenny Craig has made a similar pitch to government, arguing it offers a scalable national response to the obesity crisis.

But how many people who sign up to these programs regain the weight and return for another attempt?

Neither Weight Watchers nor Jenny Craig said they were able to provide Fairfax Media with data on how many times, on average, their clients repeat the programs.

Weight Watchers Australasia managing director Joseph Saad said it wasn't uncommon, particularly for women who regained weight at menopause or after having children, to come back, but that did not equate to yo-yo dieting. "It's OK for people to give smoking cessation a go but not everyone can quit first time, and we're no different to that . . . Ultimately does it really matter when you get to the prize of losing weight if it took three or four attempts? The benefits outweigh the number of attempts when you finally get there. We get more people to that level than any other weight-loss pro-

gram anywhere in the world and that's why the doctors support us."

Saad says Weight Watchers has more than 70 clinical trials that detail the approach's efficacy, including one showing that five years after completing the program the majority of people have kept off more than 50 per cent of the weight they lost.

So how many reach their target weight? "The top of Everest is to get to your goal weight or your BMI and keep it off – that is gold standard. We get over 10 per cent of people to that level," Saad says. "Success shouldn't just be about how much weight you lose, it should be about milestones and about what you deem success to be."

Arguably, if a drug or medical service failed to provide optimum results in 90 per cent of cases it would be pulled off the market. Yet, in the weight-loss world, these figures are considered acceptable.

It is, in part, because of the complex nature of obesity. There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Each person will gain and lose weight in different ways, influenced by a range of individual genetic, emotional, environmental and metabolic factors.

Gary Wittert, professor of medicine at the University of Adelaide and chair of the Weight Management Council, says that repeated attempts to lose weight should not be viewed as failure, and that while not perfect, formalised programs such as Jenny Craig or Weight Watchers were far more effective than DIY dieting.

"There's good evidence that the program works. Fundamentally though, the way the body works and the physiology of weight regulation, nothing is a one off . . . Success is dependent on ongoing engagement in the program – whatever you do has to be lifelong."

Saad maintains that if Weight Watchers memberships were publicly subsidised it would make a "huge dent" in Australia's obesity problem and therefore significantly reduce the costs of treating chronic disease.

Yet, as the weight-loss giants pitch their services as mainstream medical solutions, some health experts are cautioning government against funding





commercial enterprises, which have strong ties to the food industry.

In 2010, Jenny Craig's Australia and New Zealand arm was bought by global food giant Nestle – which makes Smarties, Kit Kat and Allen's Lollies. Weight Watchers New Zealand recently partnered with McDonald's to produce a range of healthy meals. The link-ups prompted the Obesity Policy Coalition to accuse junk food companies of making their customers fat then selling them the cure.

Weight Watchers also now has its own line of convenience foods, which can be incorporated into the program's eating plan.

Saad insists that the food range is not the company's core business and that members are never told they must buy those products. He says that while

Weight Watchers is a commercial organisation, that should not preclude its services from being government-funded, in the same way that drug companies supply medicines that attract subsidies.

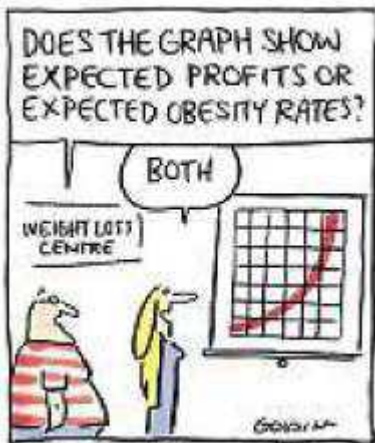
Stanton sees it differently. "I think we have to ask the question, is the aim still to give support and help people change their habits or are they just aiming to change them on to another [food] product? If it's a Jenny Craig product you don't even have a choice on what you can eat because they supply all the food, so I think it is creating a dependency. I hear people say all the time I went on Jenny Craig or Weight Watchers and lost weight but they're hugely fat now and they just think, 'I'll do it again.' People just aren't seeing that this is a problem for their health

and for their wallet and they're not attacking the real problem."

Amy Smith – who was a repeat Jenny Craig client before becoming the company's chief executive and still checks in each year for a "tune-up" – says modern life has made it harder for people to lose weight, and that a dose of realism is required.

"The less educated we are about basic nutrition, the more sedentary we are, the more availability of food and the less time we have, means the problem is compounded and what people need is support and education. You're not just going to be able to have half a dozen lessons and it be sorted. It's a life skill like driving or parenting."

■ [jstark@theage.com.au](mailto:jstark@theage.com.au)



## HEALTHY

- 1. Don't skip meals:** You may eat more when you do eat, leading to a larger stomach capacity, which can increase the amount of food you need at each meal before you feel full.
- 2. Yo-yo diets will slow your metabolism:** The body responds to continual cycles of weight loss and weight gain by lowering its metabolic rate so that when you eat normally again the body burns fewer calories.
- 3. Avoid unplanned eating:** Keep to regular meals and snacks. Increase fibre intake, and reduce foods high in fat, sugar and salt.
- 4. Try not to use food for comfort:** Explore other ways to cope with difficult emotions.
- 5. Exercise regularly:** It will protect your muscles and keep your metabolic rate ticking over at a healthy level.



Source: [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)