

# A Nutritionist's Take on *The Biggest Loser*

What to keep and what to lose from this hit TV show

**L**ast month, *The Biggest Loser* began its seventh season, having couples compete to lose the most weight and win \$250,000. The contestants' transformations on the popular television show are dramatic, but is their weight loss plan healthy or too extreme? Some positive aspects of the show include its support system and expert advice on eating healthfully and exercising, and I appreciate that it raises awareness about obesity and associated health problems. But I also fear that the show creates unreasonable expectations and that people may put their health at risk by attempting rapid weight loss without being supervised by a medical team. Mary Marian, MS, RD, Clinical Nutritionist and Lecturer at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine, weighs in on the reality show and suggests how to shed pounds healthfully.

## WHAT TO LEARN FROM THE SHOW

**Get support.** Having a workout partner may make losing weight easier, just as the converse is true: sometimes people enable each other to stay overweight. "Getting couples on the show to recognize they would both have to change to be successful was interesting," Marian notes, and ultimately helpful.

**Emphasize good nutrition.** Contestants eat five or six times a day. Aiming for a combination of 45% carbohydrates, 30% protein, and 25% fat, the small meals consist of vegetables and fruits, whole grains, and lean protein, plus two or three snacks. "That's pretty sound nutritional advice," says Marian.

**Enjoy food you prepare.** Many people don't know how to cook healthfully and feel overwhelmed in the kitchen, but the show has "gotten people to realize that healthy food is not time-consuming or difficult to prepare, it's not expensive, and it can be tasty," says Marian.

## WHAT TO LET GO

**Unrealistic results.** Contestants can lose up to 30 pounds in a week, and over a 12-week season, the winners have each lost more than 100 pounds. However, "they were eating probably 3000–4000 calories a day before the show. So cutting down to 1500 to 2000 calories and exercising 3 to 4 hours a day means that, of course, they're going to lose a dramatic amount of weight," says Marian.

**The controlled environment.** It's easier to lose weight when you're not facing real-world temptations, like the office candy dish. "[The show hasn't] gone into specifics about challenges associated with eating," says Marian. "And someone prepares the food for them," which makes healthy eating simple.

## HOW TO LOSE WEIGHT HEALTHFULLY

**Face food issues.** Do you eat because you're actually hungry or for other reasons? If you haven't dealt with that aspect first, says Marian, you'll have a difficult time maintaining weight loss.

**Eat wisely.** Marian advises eating every four hours, which translates to three meals and a snack. Protein, fruits and vegetables, and fiber help you stay satisfied, but be flexible. For example, if your snack is only 150–200 calories, you can have a treat or another piece of fruit. Or, if you want a glass of wine with dinner, limit yourself to one starch.

**Move more.** Do moderate cardio for 30 minutes most days of the week and strength training at least twice weekly. Moving more in daily life, like opting to take the stairs instead of the elevator, also adds up. Track activity with a pedometer and aim for 10,000 steps a day.

**Stay motivated.** Many people get discouraged when they find themselves slipping back into old patterns or don't see fast progress. Choose a long-term goal to keep you inspired, suggests Marian.