

ask the experts

Healthy, sensible advice from our panel of professionals

"I'm being driven mad by the chiller cabinet!"

This might seem like a daft question – but what is the healthiest option for me to spread on my toast in the morning? I need to ask, because yesterday I spent ten full minutes in front of a chiller cabinet in the supermarket, desperately trying to weigh up the relative merits of butter, butter-like spread, margarine with added olive oil/omega-3s, cholesterol-reducing products (oh, and lard). It's just too difficult – so please, can you tell me, as someone who is watching her weight and trying to feed healthy food to her family, which should I choose?

Victoria Wills says: The most important thing here is to avoid the damaged fats, as it is these that are causing problems for our health. In that respect butter is a good choice, because it has not been overly processed. However it is very high in calories so you cannot eat much of it and still lose weight (and lard on toast is not something I would recommend – that is taking things a bit too far!) Butter-like spreads and margarines tend to have higher levels of damaged fats so are not the best health choices. If you are looking to reduce your cholesterol levels then the products that claim to help with this are OK. However there are healthier ways of achieving your aim through the tried and trusted method of healthy eating and exercising. So how about ditching the toast and avoiding that chiller cabinet altogether? Try a delicious bowl of warming porridge instead – healthy, nutritious, and a fabulous way to set yourself up for a great day.

"Is my child poisoning herself?"

My daughter loves to eat apples, which she demolishes whole – skin, core and all. I've always thought this is good, as she is getting all the fibre and the nutrients that are stored in and under the skin; but a friend told me the other day that in fact, apple pips (which also get eaten in the process) are poisonous! Is this true? And if so, is my little girl likely to

come to any harm from those she has already consumed?

Mary McDermott says: Your friend is correct; apple pips in quantity are dangerous. They contain traces of cyanide – although the amount in each seed is not enough to raise any alarm! If your daughter eats the occasional core, there shouldn't be any worries; however in large amounts, there can be significant risk. For this reason, eating apple pips is not a habit that I would encourage in anyone.

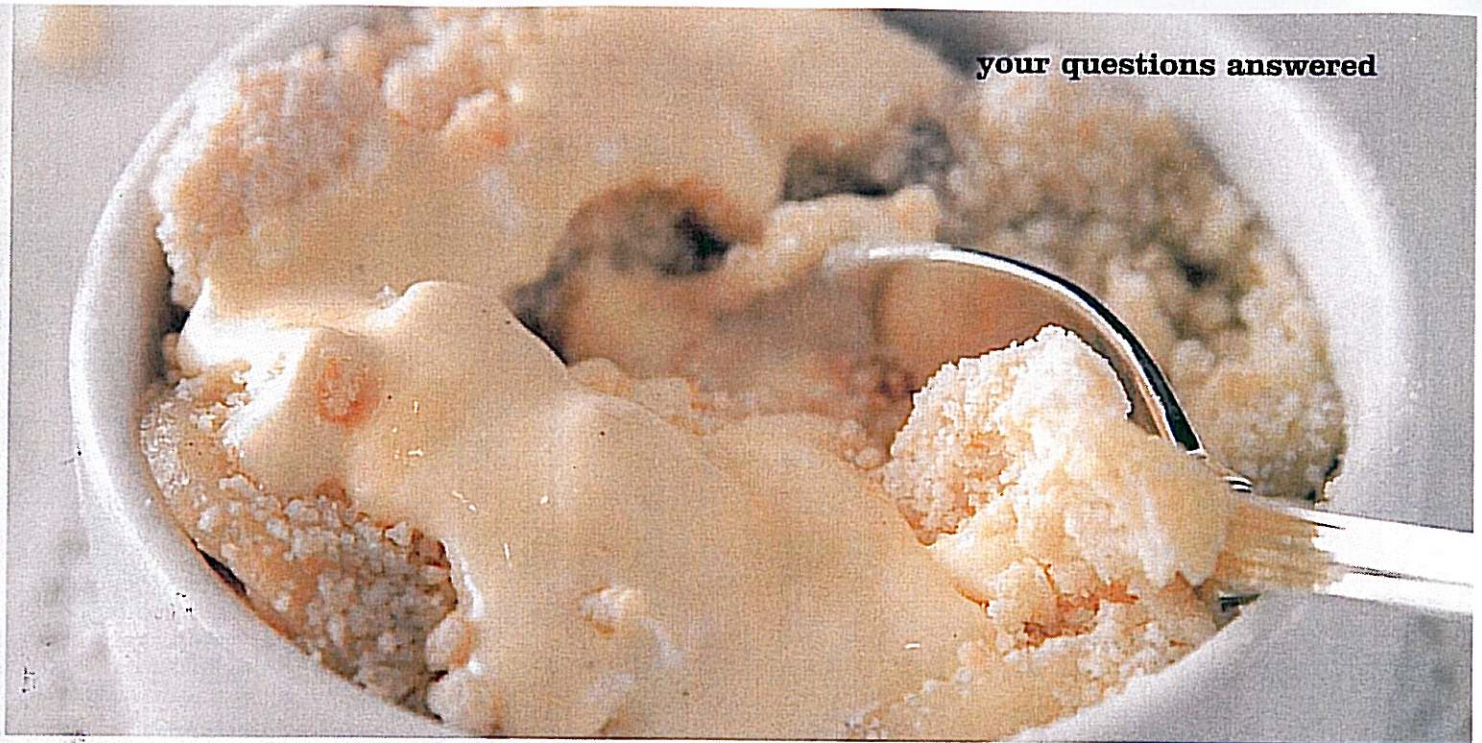
"Is oily fish really good for me?"

I am always reading in magazines and newspapers that we should all be eating lots of oily fish to stay healthy and keep our brains working well. However, I have also heard that pregnant women, or women who want to be pregnant one day, should limit their consumption of such fish – so would I be better off taking one of the fish-oil supplements that are available? Are they just as good as 'the real thing'?

Victoria Wills says: The advice on the oily fish issue is somewhat contradictory. First you are told to eat more of it for the Essential Fatty Acids (EFAs) and then to consume less if you are a woman who might one day have a child. The long and the short of it is that your body does need EFAs, and oily fish is a great source. However, due to levels of pollution, these fish tend to have high levels of pollutants in them – in particular, methylmercury. Fish oil supplements might seem like a good alternative; however the catch is that the oil is

made from those same fish! Cod liver oil, for example, is a very popular fish oil supplement made – as the name suggests – from the cod's liver, which tends to be where the highest levels of methylmercury are found in the fish. It's a bit of a minefield; but the overall advice is to make sure that you are getting enough EFAs. If you enjoy eating the fish then continue to do so, within the recommended guidelines. Otherwise choose the higher-grade fish oils, made from the flesh of the fish rather than the liver.





“Is low-carb the way to successful slimming?”

I am two stone overweight and have been struggling to slim for many years. I've tried loads of different diets, mostly based on calorie counting and cutting back my fat intake, but nothing seems to work for me. Now people seem to be saying that it's carbs, not fat, that are the key to successful weight loss – so should I be cutting back on them? And how do I square that with all the experts who keep telling me that 'wholegrains' are so important?

Keren Milton says: The key to losing weight long term is to stop dieting. If we restrict the amount of food we eat, our body panics that nutrition is going to be scarce and compensates by lowering our metabolism. So we end up eating less and less, and still cannot lose weight permanently.

Low-calorie diets tend to make us feel tired, which makes us crave and binge eat. This kind of eating plan also often restricts all fat – not just the saturated kind, but also our essential fats omega 3s and 6s, leaving us craving fatty things like chocolate or cheese.

The low carbohydrate diet is very popular and does get quick results. One of the key reasons is that it balances our blood sugar, but at The Nutrition Consultants, we feel that it is not advisable to exclude any one food group, as this can mean missing out on valuable vitamins and minerals.

To achieve your ideal weight the best approach is to follow a low Glycaemic Load (GL) way of eating, which includes all food groups (protein, carbohydrate and good fats). GL shows how quickly a carbohydrate (bread, pasta, fruit and vegetables) affects our

blood sugar levels and measures the quantity of sugar in a typical serving. Balancing your blood sugar is essential for weight loss as is portion control so try using a smaller plate and limit starchy carbohydrates (potatoes, pasta & rice) to 25% of the plate. Eat sitting down without any distractions (TV or reading) and stop eating when you are comfortable rather than full. Also become active with your GPs agreement – take the stairs, go for a 30-minute walk or swim three times a week. Good luck!

“Can we enjoy dessert and still lose weight?”

In our house, a meal just isn't complete without some sort of dessert. We're particularly fond of 'nursery sweets' – bread and butter pudding, steamed treacle sponge, fruit crumble and so on (all served with custard, of course!) However, all of us have now realised that we need to reduce our waistlines, so we've recently been sticking to yoghurt, fruit and no-sugar jelly. And we are bored, bored, bored! Can you suggest any 'comfort puds' that won't send the scales soaring?

Mary McDermott says: Quantity is often the problem with puds as I agree, they are lovely. So if you are a family who would find it hard to limit your portions, you are really best staying away from them! However, stewed fruit, perhaps sweetened with a little honey, is a good option. Baked bananas, baked apples and baked pears are also delicious – have custard occasionally if it helps, just dont make it too sweet! Something that helps some people is once a week to be a little more cautious with your first course and allow yourself a small 'proper' pud! Sometimes, just knowing that you have this treat to look forward to makes all the difference. Finally, if you have the internet, try searching for low calorie pudding recipes – you may be suprised at what you find!

Our Experts



Victoria Wills

is the founder of the UK's only boutique bootcamp NuBeginnings, which aims to tackle the underlying reasons

for destructive eating habits and weight-issues. She is a recognised expert in her field and specialises in weight loss through hypnotherapy (nubeginnings.co.uk).



Keren Milton

is a nutritional therapist at The Nutrition Consultants (01342 835430), a bespoke consultancy guiding individuals and

companies to fulfil their health potential (thenutritionconsultants.com).



Mary McDermott

is a registered dietician with many years' experience, based in East Anglia. She is a member of the British Dietetic Association and the

Health Profession Council, and combines NHS work with a busy private practice (mcdermott.org.uk).