And then there were three.
For years, Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution has dominated best-seller lists. But by last November, Atkins had company. Dr. Phil’s The Ultimate Weight Solution had cracked the top ten. And The South Beach Diet sat comfortably at number one. Where it should be.

South Beach isn’t perfect. Its rationale has some flaws. And just because people buy a self-help book, you can’t assume that they’ll follow its advice (or we’d all be trim, sculpted, happily married, wealthy, and living a purpose-driven life).

But for the first time in a long time, one of the most popular weight-loss books is recommending a healthy diet. Whether it helps those unwanted pounds disappear any better than other diets is another question.

(Continued on page 3)
Aft er all these years, publishers know what sells. And, with a few exceptions, what’s selling now are books about “good carbs.”

Books like The South Beach Diet, The Zone, and Good Carbs, Bad Carbs argue that “bad” carbs are making us fat. Even the Atkins diet, which has urged dieters to limit all carbs since the 1970s, has modeled its recent advice (especially for Phase 2) after the “good-carb” books. In a nutshell, here’s what they claim:

1. Bad carbs cause a quick rise in blood sugar.
2. High blood sugar raises blood insulin levels.
3. Insulin leads to weight gain (either by making the body store fat or by lowering blood sugar levels so much that it causes hunger).

The solution? Simple, say the books. All dieters have to do is eat “good” carbs (like whole grains, vegetables, and beans) instead of “bad” carbs (like sugar, white bread, and potatoes).

Yet most obesity experts, including those who believe in that advice, agree that the research cupboard is bare. “It’s amazing how few good studies have looked at how different carbohydrates affect weight loss,” says Walter Willett, chair of the nutrition department at the Harvard School of Public Health. “So far, the long-term evidence on weight loss is meager. We need bigger and longer randomized trials.”

“Lose weight! Increase energy! Look great! This book will...show you how to change your life once and for all.”

“I’m not exaggerating when I say that this diet can, as a fringe benefit, save your life.”

“...learn to live a healthier, fuller life from this point forward.”

Guess which of those promises come from which of the three top-selling diet books, Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution, The South Beach Diet, and Dr. Phil’s The Ultimate Weight Solution. (Answer: they’re in order.) Most diet books follow a formula. Amid the dispelled myths, tips, and personal success stories, nearly all promise that:

- it’s not a diet but a way of life,
- the food is delicious and you won’t be hungry,
- you’re overweight because you ate the wrong (not too much) food,
- you’ll lose weight because you’ll eat the right (not less) food, and
- the diet will prevent either the major—or virtually all—diseases.

If you believe all that, we’ve got some old Enron stock for you.

Glycemic Confusion

The South Beach Diet calls them “slow sugar” and “fast sugar.” To Good Carbs, Bad Carbs, they’re “tricklers” and “gushers.”

But the message is the same: “As far as obesity is concerned,” says South Beach, “fast sugar is worse for you; slower is better.” How do you know which foods are which?

“In the early 1980s, Dr. David Jenkins led a team of Canadian researchers who devised a scale to measure the rapidity and degree with which a fixed quantity of food increases your blood sugar,” writes South Beach author Arthur Agatston. “They called it the glycemic index.”

In fact, the index is much more complicated than most books pretend.

“People think that a food has a definitive glycemic index, but it depends on how the food is processed, stored, ripened, cut, and cooked,” says Xavier Pi-Sunyer, an obesity expert at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York.

Furthermore, diet books imply that “good” carbs like whole grains have a low glycemic index (GI, for short), while “bad” carbs like sugars, white flour, and other refined grains have a high GI. In fact:

- Bread is typically high-GI, whether whole-wheat or white, because it’s made from finely ground flour.
- Pasta is low-GI, whether whole-wheat or white, but there are variations. “Thin linguine has a higher GI than thick linguine,” notes Pi-Sunyer. “How would we advise the public about this major difference?”

Photo: Nick Waring.
Robert Atkins died last spring after falling on the icy pavement outside his New York City office. A few months later, his clinic closed its doors for good.

But his work lives on, not only in the diet books that continue to sell like hotcakes (low-carb, of course), but in the more than 100 snack bars, frozen dinners, muffin mixes, ice creams, and other foods and supplements that carry his name.

The pitch: Atkins-brand foods have fewer “net” carbohydrates than conventional foods. What are net carbs? They’re what’s left after Atkins Nutritionals replaces some of the foods’ carbs with protein from soy and wheat, and after it deducts other carbs that, according to the company, have “a minimal impact on blood sugar.” (The list includes fiber, glycerin, sugar alcohols, and polydextrose.)


Atkins Nutritionals won’t say whether it has tested its foods to make sure that they don’t raise blood sugar. Just because a food is sweetened with glycerin, sugar alcohols, or other sugar substitutes doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s gentler on your blood sugar. For example, a sugar-free apple muffin or banana cake raises blood sugar as much as its sugar-sweetened counterpart.1

Atkins’ books claim that only carbs that raise blood sugar cause weight gain, but the evidence is scanty.

What’s more, low-carb foods aren’t cheap. A 12-ounce box of pasta costs $5.99. Four cups of instant soup run $12. Fifteen brownies will set you back $32.

**Supplements**

Atkins Nutritionals also sells pills to “help break up a weight loss logjam.” Among the ones Atkins recommends:

**Coenzyme Q10:** Take 100 mg a day, since an “exploratory” study two decades ago found that people who took CoQ10 lost more weight than people who didn’t.

*Reality check:* The study, which was never published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal, was never followed up.

**Carnitine:** Take 1,500 mg a day, just in case you have a deficiency of the amino-acid derivative.

*Reality check:* No good research shows that overweight people are deficient in carnitine, or that taking 1,500 mg a day helps people lose weight.2

**Chromium:** Take up to 1,000 micrograms a day, because preliminary research 15 years ago suggested that it helped build muscle and burn fat.

*Reality check:* Better studies since then have come up empty.

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who want to lose weight,” he says. “But the best way to do that is to reduce calorie intake and increase activity level.”

When Wolever put people on low-GI diets to control their diabetes, the pounds didn’t melt away. “People tended to lose a little weight, but it wasn’t significant,” he explains. “And we found no differences in how full they felt on low-GI foods.”

In fact, in one study of 35 people with diabetes, those who were given high-GI cereals (corn flakes, puffed rice, or crispy rice) lost two pounds after six weeks, while those who got low-GI cereals (Bran Buds or a Cheerios-type cereal, plus an added fiber called psyllium) lost no weight.2

Others agree that the research is in its infancy.

“A low-GI diet may suppress hunger. But until there is research over the long term, we just don’t know,” says Susan Roberts of the Jean Mayer U.S. Department of Agriculture Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University in Boston.

A recent review of the evidence reached this conclusion:3 “The ideal human intervention study on low-GI vs high-GI diets has not yet been conducted.”

For example, in many studies, the diets differ in fiber or protein content, not just in the glycemic index of their foods. “A lot of articles hypothesize about the glycemic index, but there are not a lot of controlled studies to see whether a low-GI diet works,” says Bonnie Brehm, an obesity researcher at the University of Cincinnati.

Beyond the Index

If a low-GI diet is no guarantee that we’ll all look like Demi Moore and what’s-his-name, so what? Maybe it’s not a low glycemic index, but more whole grains or fiber, that can keep us slim.

“It’s hard to draw conclusions because the studies on fiber are all too different—some use supplements, some use real food, some have a small fiber increase, some have a modestly big increase,” says Tufts’ Susan Roberts.

Studies on whole grains and weight are even scarcer. “Our study found that diets higher in whole grains and fiber slow weight gain compared to

Dr. Phil’s pills

If you hit it right, a popular diet book can be a gold mine. But the big players know how to dig even deeper. Dr. Phil—who at 6’4” and 240 pounds is clearly overweight—wants fans to pay $120 for his vitamins and up to $90 for his bars and drink mixes every month. Here’s the scoop:

Weight Management Supplements

If you’ve got a waist smaller than 35 inches (women) or 40 inches (men), Dr. Phil wants you to buy his Weight Management Supplement & Complete Multivitamin for Pear Body Types. If you have a larger waist, you need his supplement for Apple Body Types. Either way, it’s 12 pills a day, 60 bucks a month.

What’s the difference? Very little. Both contain the same 23 vitamins and minerals, plus carnitine (an amino-acid derivative) and four herbs. The “pear” pills also have a speck of soy isoflavones, green tea, and Rhodiola rosea root. In contrast, the “apple” pills contain Gymnema sylvestre leaves, vanadium, and white kidney bean extract.

Never mind that there are no studies showing that the supplements promote weight loss in anyone, pear or apple. No matter what fruit your body looks like, Dr. Phil thinks you need to “take your weight management efforts to the next level” by plunking down an additional $60 a month on 10 “Intensifier” pills a day. The Intensifiers contain:

- **Coenzyme Q10:** “Required for the production of energy in the body.”
  **Reality check:** May help with congestive heart failure, not excess weight.

- **Conjugated linoleic acid (CLA):** “May reduce the deposit of excess body fat and increase the ratio of lean body mass to fat, when combined with a low-calorie diet and exercise.”
  **Reality check:** May also cause liver damage and worsen insulin resistance.

- **EPA and DHA:** “Support healthy body membranes and heart health.”
  **Reality check:** These omega-3 fats, which are found in fish oil, may help prevent sudden cardiac death, but have nothing to do with weight loss.

- **Tyrosine and L-theanine:** “May help reduce every day stress.”
  **Reality check:** No good studies back up the benefits of theanine or the trivial amount of tyrosine in Dr. Phil’s Intensifier pills.

- **Vitamin C:** “Protects your body against the damaging effects of free radicals.”
  **Reality check:** There is no evidence that vitamin C has any impact on weight.

Nutrition Shakes

You’re nobody in the weight-loss game unless you sell a meal replacement shake. Shape Up! Shakes contain “scientifically researched levels of ingredients that can help you change your behavior to take control of your weight,” says Dr. Phil.

In fact, they’re just a run-of-the-mill powder made from milk, eight kinds of fiber, and added vitamins (which you don’t need if you’re already taking his 22 pills a day—or your own inexpensive multi).

Nutrition Bars

Dr. Phil’s Shape Up! bars are concoctions of sugars, oil, soy protein, fiber, and still more added vitamins. So much for his advice to keep sugars and fats “off-limits if you want to successfully control your weight.”

—David Schardt

(continued on p. 8)
### COVER STORY

**battle of the diet books**

Is it the title? Is it the promises? Is it the word of mouth? It’s not clear how people pick a diet book, but one thing’s for sure: the decision is rarely based on good science. Here’s our take on the most popular diet books.

Since no large long-term studies have pitted them head-to-head, we can’t evaluate the diets’ ability to make you skinner. Instead, we’ve graded each book’s scientific credibility (“Is the Science Solid?”) and whether the diet it recommends is healthy. (In “What You Eat,” “Yes” means frequently, “Less” means rarely, if ever.)

The books are listed in order according to Amazon.com’s top-selling “Diet and Weight Loss” books in mid-November.

We added Dean Ornish’s *Eat More, Weigh Less* and the Weight Watchers cookbook because a recent study tested both diets. We excluded other cookbooks and how-to spin-offs of the top-sellers.

The chart gives only thumbnail sketches. See the books for more details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>CLAIM</th>
<th>WHAT YOU EAT</th>
<th>IS THE SCIENCE SOLID?</th>
<th>IS THE DIET HEALTHY?</th>
<th>WORST FEATURE</th>
<th>MOST PREPPOSTEROUS CLAIM</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The South Beach Diet</strong> By Arthur Agatston</td>
<td>Switching to good carbs stops insulin resistance, cures cravings, and causes weight loss. Good fats protect the heart and prevent hunger.</td>
<td><strong>Yes:</strong> Seafood, chicken breast, lean meat, low-fat cheese, most veggies, nuts, oils; (later) whole grains, most fruits, low-fat milk or yogurt, beans. <strong>Less:</strong> Fatty meats, full-fat cheese, refined grains, sweets.</td>
<td>Healthy version of Atkins diet that’s backed by solid evidence on fats and heart disease.</td>
<td><strong>↑</strong> Mostly healthy foods.</td>
<td>Restricts carrots, bananas, pineapple, and watermelon.</td>
<td>You won’t ever be hungry (despite menus that average just 1,200 calories a day).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Ultimate Weight Solution</strong> By Phil McGraw</td>
<td>Foods that take time to prepare and chew lead to weight loss. Other “Keys to Weight Loss Freedom” include “no-fail environment,” “right thinking,” “healing feelings,” and “circle of support.”</td>
<td><strong>Yes:</strong> Seafood, poultry, meat, low-fat dairy, whole grains, most veggies, fruits, (limited) oils. <strong>Less:</strong> Fatty meats, sweets, refined grains, full-fat dairy, microwaveable entrees, fried foods.</td>
<td>Tough-love manual that relies more on Dr. Phil’s opinion than on science.</td>
<td><strong>↑</strong> Mostly healthy foods.</td>
<td><strong>↓</strong> No menus, recipes, or advice on how much of what to eat.</td>
<td>Readers may buy Dr. Phil’s expensive, questionable supplements, bars, and shakes (see “Dr. Phil’s Pills,” p. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution</strong> By Robert C. Atkins</td>
<td>A low-carb diet is the key to weight loss (and good health) because carbs cause high insulin levels.</td>
<td><strong>Yes:</strong> Seafood, poultry, meat, eggs, cheese, salad veggies, oils, butter, cream; (later) limited amounts of nuts, fruits, wine, beans, veggies, whole grains. <strong>Less:</strong> Sweets, refined grains, milk, yogurt.</td>
<td>Low-carb “bible” overstates the results of weak studies and the evidence on supplements. (However, in recent small studies, people lost more weight after 6—but not 12—months on Atkins than on a typical diet.)</td>
<td><strong>↑</strong> Mostly healthy foods.</td>
<td><strong>↓</strong> Too much red meat may raise risk of colon or prostate cancer.</td>
<td>Long-term safety not established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good Carbs, Bad Carbs</strong> By Johanna Burani &amp; Linda Rao</td>
<td>Switching from high-glycemic-index foods (“gushers”) to low-glycemic-index foods (“tricklers”) aids weight loss.</td>
<td><strong>Yes:</strong> Sourdough bread, beans, most fruits, low-fat dairy, most veggies, chips, pasta, Special K pudding, pound cake. <strong>Less:</strong> White bread, sweets, Raisin Bran, potatoes, watermelon.</td>
<td>Dummied-down, sloppy version of <em>The New Glucose Revolution</em> that inflates the importance of the glycemic index.</td>
<td><strong>↑</strong> Mostly healthy foods.</td>
<td><strong>↓</strong> Few recipes, menus, or specifics.</td>
<td>“Only by doing Atkins can you lose weight eating the same number of calories on which you used to gain weight.”</td>
</tr>
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| **Eat Right 4 Your Type**  
By Peter J. D’Adamo & Catherine Whitney | Your blood type determines your diet, supplements, and personality because it is “the key to your body’s entire immune system.” | **Yes:** Type O: Meat, seafood, fruits, veggies.  
(Less: Wheat, beans.)  
**Type A:** Fruits, veggies, beans, most seafood.  
(Less: Meat, dairy, wheat.)  
**Type B:** Meat, beans, fruits, veggies.  
(Less: Chicken, wheat.)  
**Type AB:** Seafood, dairy, fruits, veggies.  
(Less: Red meat.) | About as scientific as a horoscope. | Not applicable (diet varies according to blood type, ancestry, etc.). | May convince people to use these diets to treat cancer, asthma, infections, diabetes, arthritis, hypertension, and infertility. | “If you are a Type A woman with a family history of breast cancer, consider introducing snails into your diet.” |
| **Weight Watchers New Complete Cookbook** | Following a point system helps dieters cut calories and lose weight. | **Yes:** Fruits, veggies, low-fat dairy, poultry, seafood, lean meats, grains.  
**Less:** None. | No science cited, but its sensible advice is used by millions. | Mostly healthy foods. | Some packaged Weight Watchers foods (none are mentioned in the cookbook) aren’t exactly nutritious. | Not applicable (cookbook). |
| **The New Glucose Revolution**  
By Jennie Brand-Miller, Thomas Wolever, Kaye Foster-Powell, and Stephen Colagiuri | Low-glycemic-index foods keep you satisfied longer and help you burn more body fat and less muscle. | **Yes:** Beans, pasta, most fruits, veggies, low-fat dairy, poultry, lean meat, seafood.  
**Less:** Potatoes, white bread, fatty meats, full-fat dairy, watermelon. | Reasonable interpretation of the science, though stronger for heart disease and diabetes than for weight loss. | Mostly healthy foods.  
**Fuzzy limits**  
| | | | | | | |
| **Enter The Zone**  
By Barry Sears | Eating the right mix of the right fats, carbs, and protein keeps you trim and healthy by lowering insulin. | **Yes:** Seafood, poultry, lean meat, fruits, most veggies, low-fat dairy, nuts.  
**Less:** Fatty meats, full-fat dairy, butter, shortening, (limited) grains, sweets, potatoes, carrots, bananas. | Exaggerates evidence that the Zone diet is the key to weight loss and implies that the diet can cure virtually every disease. | Mostly healthy foods.  
**Few recipes or menus.** | May convince people to use the diet to treat cancer, AIDS, chronic pain, impotence, depression, and arthritis. | “I believe that the hormonal benefits gained from a Zone-favorable diet will be considered the primary treatment for all chronic disease states, with drugs being used as secondary backup.” |
| **The Fat Flush Plan**  
By Ann Louise Gittleman | Detoxifying the liver and lymph system, taking omega-3 fats that burn calories, and avoiding insulin-raising carbs promotes weight loss. | **Yes:** Eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, most veggies, fruits, organic coffee, nuts, cranberry juice; (later) beans, whole grains, cheese.  
**Less:** Sweets, butter, margarine, refined grains, caffeine, milk, yogurt, yeast. | Kooky mishmash of old diet lore and new good-carb theory. | Mostly healthy foods.  
**Too much red meat and eggs.** | Useless fat-flush kit costs $68 per month for vitamins, omega-3 fats, etc. that “trigger fat burning...and nourish our tired and overworked livers.” | “The best way to give those fatty deposits [in your thighs and arms] the old heave-ho is by cleansing your lymphatic system with a bouncing action or by moving your arms while walking briskly.” |
| **Eat More, Weigh Less**  
By Dean Ornish | Slashing fat is the key to weight loss. | **Yes:** Beans, fruits, veggies, grains, (limited) non-fat dairy.  
**Less:** Meat, seafood, poultry, oils, nuts, butter, dairy (except non-fat), sweets, alcohol. | Diet worked (when combined with exercise and stress reduction) in a small-but-long-term study. | Mostly healthy foods.  
**Too many carbs may raise triglycerides and lower HDL (“good”) cholesterol if people don’t exercise, lose weight, and reduce stress.** | Unnecessarily restricts seafood, turkey and chicken breast, oats, nuts, and fat-free dairy. | Eating a very low-fat vegetarian diet is easy. |
diets high in refined carbohydrates,” says Eric Rimm of the Harvard School of Public Health.

But the difference in weight was small—only a few pounds over 12 years—and it’s impossible to know whether whole-grain eaters did other things to avoid obesity.4

“Would I like to see trials that randomly assign people to eat whole grains or refined grains for a year?” asks Rimm. “Sure.” In the meantime, he recommends whole grains for everyone, overweight or not.

“There’s a growing body of evidence that whole grains are more beneficial than refined grains to reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.”

Diet vs Diet

After years of ignoring popular diet books, researchers recently started testing Dr. Atkins head-to-head against “conventional diets,” which cut calories mostly from fat. Three research teams released preliminary results last year.5-7

“Our study, as well as the two others, were all relatively small and short-term, but the results of all three were consistent,” says the University of Cincinnati’s Bonnie Brehm. “The healthy obese women in our study lost more weight on the Atkins diet than on the American Heart Association’s diet.”

Brehm’s study lasted only six months. In another study, the Atkins dieters also lost more weight, but the difference between the two groups disappeared after a year. Still, what dieter wouldn’t jump at the chance to lose extra weight for six months?

What’s more, “we don’t have as much reservation as we used to about the cardiovascular risk factors of an Atkins diet,” adds Brehm. “The weight loss seems to override the high saturated fat content of the diet.”

But what happens to LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and other risk factors for heart disease once weight stabilizes is an open question, she adds. Also, her study tested women with normal, not high, cholesterol.

“The women in our study averaged only five grams of fiber a day,” she notes. (That’s one-sixth of what experts recommend.) And despite what Atkins claims, “they did have constipation problems.”

Phase 2 of the Atkins diet allows more fruits and vegetables, she acknowledges. “But if you don’t lose enough weight in Phase 2, you have to move back to Phase 1, so you’re on that restricted diet longer than the book says.

“I don’t see the medical community recommending Atkins as a healthy diet because it’s so restricted,” says Brehm. “You miss out on fiber and any phytochemicals in fruits and vegetables that we may not even know about yet.”

The Bottom Line

Where does that leave the ever-expanding legions of dieters?

According to media reports last November, a new study found no difference in weight loss on four diets—Atkins, The Zone, Dean Ornish, and Weight Watchers. But until the study has been vetted and published, it’s too early to weigh its conclusions.

Ornish’s book, Eat More, Weigh Less, resurrects an old question: should dieters eat a very-low-fat diet, which gets 70 to 75 percent of its calories from carbohydrates?

Carbs shouldn’t exceed 60 or 65 percent of calories, says the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, the American Heart Association, and the National Academy of Sciences.

“There’s a growing body of evidence that whole grains are more beneficial than refined grains to reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.”