



What do you know about the HCG diet?

Q I've been trying to lose weight for a long time and nothing seems to work. What do you know about the HCG diet?

A The HCG diet is a weight-loss plan that combines daily injections of human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG) with severe calorie restriction—only 500 calories per day. HCG is a hormone that's released in large quantities during pregnancy and can be extracted from the urine of pregnant women. It was first promoted as a weight-loss aid in the 1950s by British physician Dr. Albert T. Simeons, who claimed that the HCG regimen caused the body to preferentially burn stored fat, especially fat from the stomach, hips, and thighs. He also said that HCG dieters would lose more fat than muscle and would not be as hungry or irritable as you might expect. In 1954, Simeons reported that he had treated 500 patients and found that those who followed the HCG weight-loss plan for 40 days lost 20 to 30 pounds without feeling weak or excessively hungry.

Since then, the HCG diet has been studied in randomized trials that have included control groups receiving a placebo (saline) injection instead of HCG. In almost every case, researchers

found that any weight loss was entirely due to the low-calorie diet. A meta-analysis (combined analysis) of 24 studies published in 1995 concluded that there is no scientific evidence that HCG causes weight loss, redistributes fat, reduces hunger, or creates a feeling of well-being.

The FDA has stated that HCG is of no benefit in the treatment of obesity. Nevertheless, the HCG diet has recently been getting attention in the popular press and Internet blogs. In part, that's because HCG is now available in a sublingual form, meaning that it can be taken as a lozenge placed under the tongue—far more convenient than an injection. The sublingual form has not been tested in clinical trials.

I do not recommend the HCG diet. The calorie intake is too low to provide adequate nutrition, and scientific studies have shown that HCG does nothing to enhance weight loss or improve the way you feel. There are also a few reports of adverse effects—at least from the HCG injections—including blood clots, headaches, restlessness, depression, and dizziness. Finally, this diet does nothing to change the habits that lead to weight gain, and there's no evidence that it results in sustainable weight loss.

What can I do about twitching eyelids?

Q From time to time, my eyelids twitch. What causes this, and is there anything I can do about it?

A It's a common—and uncommonly distracting—problem. The twitches are involuntary spasms of the muscles that control the eyelids. These spasms can cause fluttering in part of the eyelid or cause the eyelid to repeatedly close and reopen. The spasms last minutes to hours and may continue intermittently for several days. We don't know what causes them, but many experts believe that fatigue, stress, eyestrain, and caffeine all play some role. More prolonged and severe twitching—the kind that causes the eyelid to completely close—may be caused by irritation on the surface of the eye (the cornea) or in tissues lining the eyelids (the conjunctiva).

There are several things you can do to ease the spasms. Close the eye and apply a warm compress—or try pulling gently on the lid. Get more sleep, and reduce your caffeine and alcohol intake. If the twitching occurs while you're reading or us-

ing a computer, relax your eyes occasionally by focusing on something in the distance. If your eyes are dry or irritated, use lubricant eyedrops such as Refresh, Systane, Thera Tears, or Visine Tears.

Most eyelid twitches are harmless and stop within a week or two. If they don't, you should see a clinician for an eye exam. See a clinician even sooner if the twitching completely closes your eye or involves other parts of your face, or if your eyelid is drooping (a sign of weakened muscles) or your eye is red, swollen, or exuding a discharge. These are signs of a possible infection or underlying nerve or muscle condition.

Sometimes even benign eyelid twitches persist, eroding the quality of life. In that case, small injections of botulinum toxin A (Botox) may provide temporary relief. If you decide to try Botox, make sure that the clinician who administers it has expertise in this type of therapy.

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