



Popular Weight Loss Programs

How They Stack Up and
What to Tell Clients

By **Dessie Webb, PhD, RD**

According to the National Institutes of Health, two-thirds of adults in the United States are either overweight or obese. That makes for a huge market for weight loss programs. Television commercials, print ads, Facebook ads, tweets, and Instagram posts for weight loss programs are everywhere. As a result, dietitians can expect their clients and patients to come to them for a professional opinion regarding the value and effectiveness of these programs and whether they're worth the cost, which, for some, can be quite high.

In this article, *Today's Dietitian* (TD) speaks with RDs affiliated with several of the most popular diet programs to get the inside scoop on how they work and how dietitians are involved with planning and implementation. The following list isn't

comprehensive but does include diet programs rated as some of the best this year by *U.S. News & World Report*.

SLIMFAST

Maryann Walsh, MPH, RD, CDE, a consultant to the SlimFast Plan, is involved with the company's menu planning and brand messaging. Established in 1977 in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, SlimFast's program consists of substituting SlimFast products for two meals per day. Guidelines for the third meal are provided for free to any SlimFast customer. There also are lines of SlimFast products for people following the popular keto diet plan or those who have been diagnosed with diabetes. The goal is to limit calories to 1,200 per day for women and 1,700 per day for men. Walsh is involved in developing meal plans, brand messaging, and moderating SlimFast's Facebook

groups, each of which has a membership of around 15,000. The program encourages 30 minutes of exercise five days per week. SlimFast has no organized meetings and no enrollment or contract, so there are no fees associated with the program. SlimFast shakes and bars can be purchased at Walmart, Sam's Club, several pharmacy chains, and online.

COST: SlimFast is the least expensive of the weight loss programs reviewed here. The only cost involved is the purchase of shakes or bars for the two meals each day. The cost ranges from about \$2 to \$5 per day, depending on where the products are purchased.

SUPPORT: While SlimFast doesn't provide counseling or support groups, the Facebook "Together" groups allow customers to offer mutual support and share weight-loss tips.

MAINTENANCE: Instead of replacing two meals per day with SlimFast products, one meal per day can be replaced with SlimFast.

RESEARCH: More than 40 clinical studies have been conducted, showing that SlimFast is at least as effective as other weight loss programs, however, no studies have been done recently. Instead of clinical studies, SlimFast now works with before-and-after weight-loss candidates. Those who have successfully lost weight share their results and experiences in brand communications and marketing as well as Facebook groups.

BOTTOM LINE: SlimFast is the most economical of the weight loss programs reviewed by RD. There's minimal investment and as much or as little involvement in Facebook groups as clients and patients want. There are no SlimFast group meetings. However, some local meet-ups have been organized through the Facebook groups. There are tracking data evaluating long-term maintenance.

NUTRISYSTEM

Established in 1972 in Philadelphia, Nutrisystem does most of the work for dieters in the form of prepackaged and delivered meals and snacks. According to Courtney McCormick, MPH, RDN, LDN, manager of clinical research and nutrition for Nutrisystem, the food products provide 60% of daily calories to clients as shelf-stable or frozen entrees, shakes, and snacks that can be delivered to the client's door. The remaining 40% are grocery items or restaurant meals. Clients are provided with printed materials that include meal plans and grocery lists. A typical meal plan for women consists of three meals, a snack, and a shake. Men get two snacks. Meal plans can be customized for, eg, low-sodium or diabetes applications, with help from trained staff at the call center. While there are gluten-free items available, Nutrisystem doesn't have a gluten-free diet plan. Weight-loss kits provide five days of meals and a guide to planning and preparing food items purchased at a supermarket. There's no contract, but the food items are less expensive if a minimum of two months' supply is purchased. Some products can be purchased from Walmart and grocery stores, as well as online; however, there's no distribution in drugstores. Fruits and vegetables, which are part of the diet plan, are purchased separately.

Nutrisystem recommends 30 minutes of activity per day, which can be broken up into 10-minute sessions.

COST: For a two-month supply of Nutrisystem products, costs start at about \$11 per day. Shelf-stable products are less expensive than frozen items. A woman's plan typically costs about \$14 per day, for a man's meal plan that provides two snacks, the cost could be about \$16 per day.

SUPPORT: There are no support groups. However, there's a call center with a dietary department to answer questions. Not all dietary representatives are RDs, but they generally have a health background, such as RNs. However, there are RDs in the dietary department who are certified diabetes educators to help consumers enrolled in Nutrisystem's diabetes program. The Leaf is Nutrisystem's inspirational blog on nutrition, fitness, recipes, and lifestyle changes. The NaMI app for tracking food and water intake, activity, and weight also is available, whether one is on the Nutrisystem program or not.

MAINTENANCE: Clients typically stay with Nutrisystem for three months. A variety of transition and maintenance programs are offered, but they generally begin with two meals per week that are planned and prepared by the client instead of the prepackaged foods. The call center provides guidance on flexibility in meal planning and dining out.

RESEARCH: According to McCormick, Nutrisystem conducts clinical studies to help in the development of new programs. Studies published in the last six to 10 years have found that, after six months on the Nutrisystem program, participants with type 2 diabetes lost an average of 7.5% baseline weight and experienced clinically meaningful changes in A1c. No longer-term studies have been published.

BOTTOM LINE: The Nutrisystem program offers convenience and structure for people who would prefer to have most everything planned out and delivered. There's no one-on-one counseling, but printed materials, a tracking app, and Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts that offer educational information are available, and some independent support groups have surfaced on Facebook.

JENNY CRAIG

Briana Rodriguez, RDN, CPT, a dietitian with Jenny Craig, says Jenny Craig is recommended for people who want to lose 16 lbs or less. Members follow a personalized menu plan that has been designed by dietitians and nutritionists. The amount of time it takes to lose weight varies depending on each member's goals and desired weight loss. However, the program aims to support a loss of 1 to 2 lbs per week. Established in 1983 in Melbourne, Australia, Jenny Craig does most of the work for dieters in the form of prepackaged and delivered meals and snacks. The goal of the programs isn't only to get members to lose weight but also to establish healthful habits.

The Jenny Craig app helps keep members accountable with trackers for meals, drinks, and exercise, and it offers motivation. Members can choose exercise they're comfortable with and that they find enjoyable. The company recently launched its Rapid Results Program, which is based on the body's circadian rhythm and is said to take advantage of the body's natural