

The Economist

The Economists' diet

Two formerly obese economists dole out advice on slimming

Christopher Payne and Rob Barnett



The Economists' Diet: The Surprising Formula for Losing Weight and Keeping It Off.

DO YOU indulge in QE (quantitative eating)? Do you have a high marginal propensity to consume chocolate? Then you might be piqued by a diet book from two self-described “formerly obese economists” on how to lose weight.

To be honest, the economics within this book is very much a side order rather than the main course. A diet is described as a “self-imposed eating-austerity programme”. There is some discussion of people’s general failure to give enough weight to the long-term consequences of their actions; a phenomenon known as hyperbolic discounting. And there is some neat use of the concept of diminishing returns. Eat a wide variety of foods and you may always get pleasure from trying something different. But limit your diet and you will soon tire of eating more.

But the “surprising formula” promised by the book is scarcely a shocker: eat less. The authors think this is more important than exercise since the latter tends to make you hungry; it is easy to undo all the good work of a cycle ride with a snack.

Eating less requires you to confine yourself to one square meal (defined as some grilled meat and two side portions of vegetables) a day. The other meals should be very light; a non-creamy soup, a salad or a bowl of non-sugary cereal. If you do end up splurging on a big meal or a treat, then the other meals should be skipped altogether.

But the authors are not too prescriptive. The aim is to find a diet that works for each individual. And the best way of achieving that is to weigh yourself every day. Only then can you see whether the diet is working.

The book is full of perfectly sensible advice, such as avoiding faddy diets, the lure of “low-fat” foods and the temptation to drink all your calories in the form of fizzy drinks, alcohol and sugary coffees. At nearly 300 pages, however, it is rather repetitive. But, as experienced economists, the authors may have realised that, when it comes to diet plans, demand is almost infinite.

This article appeared in the Books and arts section of the print edition under the headline "Quantitative eating"