

Diet Aids and Meal Substitutes: Are They Worth It?

If you're like many Americans, January means resolutions....and the most common one around is to lose weight. For some, that means considering meal substitutes---the bars and shakes that promise convenience and weight loss all at once. Just what is in these things, and are they worth it?

Slim Fast is one of the older companies around that sells these products. Their line includes "shakes" in a can, powders to make into shakes, "meal bars", "snack bars" and "breakfast bars". It's a little hard to tell how they determine what category to put each item in, since there appears to be a good deal of overlap. However, a sampling includes a "meal bar" with 220 calories, 45 of which are from fat. In this bar, most of the carbs listed are sugars and sugar alcohols, with very little fiber. There are 8gm of protein as well. Compare this to one of their "high protein meal bars", which has 15 gms of protein, but 6gm of total fat, half of which is saturated fat. In this bar also, most of the carbs are sugars with very little fiber.

Do you see a pattern here? Although each bar has less than a third of its calories derived from fat, a lot of that is the artery-clogging saturated kind. Although the numbers for carbs look ok, the vast majority of those carbs are from sugars or sugar alcohols (Sucralose), not fiber. If you are substituting a meal with one of these bars, you'll lose some weight (maybe) simply because you're eating fewer calories, but at the same time, you'll be asking for heart trouble and other issues with the saturated fat, sugar and especially the low fiber content.

Adkins has its own line of products as well. If we simply look at the bars, one example has 240 calories, 110 of which are from fat! (Total fat grams = 12, half of which is saturated). I know that this fits into the Adkins ideal, but it's very tough on your arteries. There is a lot more fiber in these bars (10 gms), and 19 grams of protein, but the ingredient list is a bit frightening. It includes glycerine, polydextrose, maltodextrin, cellulose and guar gum-----all things we really aren't designed to eat.

Going to the "healthfood" section of the store, you'll find Luna bars and Clif bars. Although these both are made from mostly organic products and look a little more like real food, their numbers aren't much better. A Luna bar has 180 calories, only 40 of which are from fat; however, nearly all the fat is saturated fat! Their protein amounts are similar to the other bars, but the fiber is more than double.

Keep all these numbers in perspective: in a 2000 calorie/ day diet, we should be getting 30 gm of fiber each day and 90-100 gm of protein. That would be very hard to achieve if, say, you use one of these substitutes for both breakfast and lunch, and then ate "real" food only for dinner. A healthier option, and a lot more satisfying, is to eat real food ALL the time---just be heavy on the veggies, lighter on fruit, somewhat lighter on the grains (whole grains, of course) and very

judicious with meats and fats. It will be fewer calories than what most of us usually eat, so the weight WILL come off, especially if you get up and move at the same time!