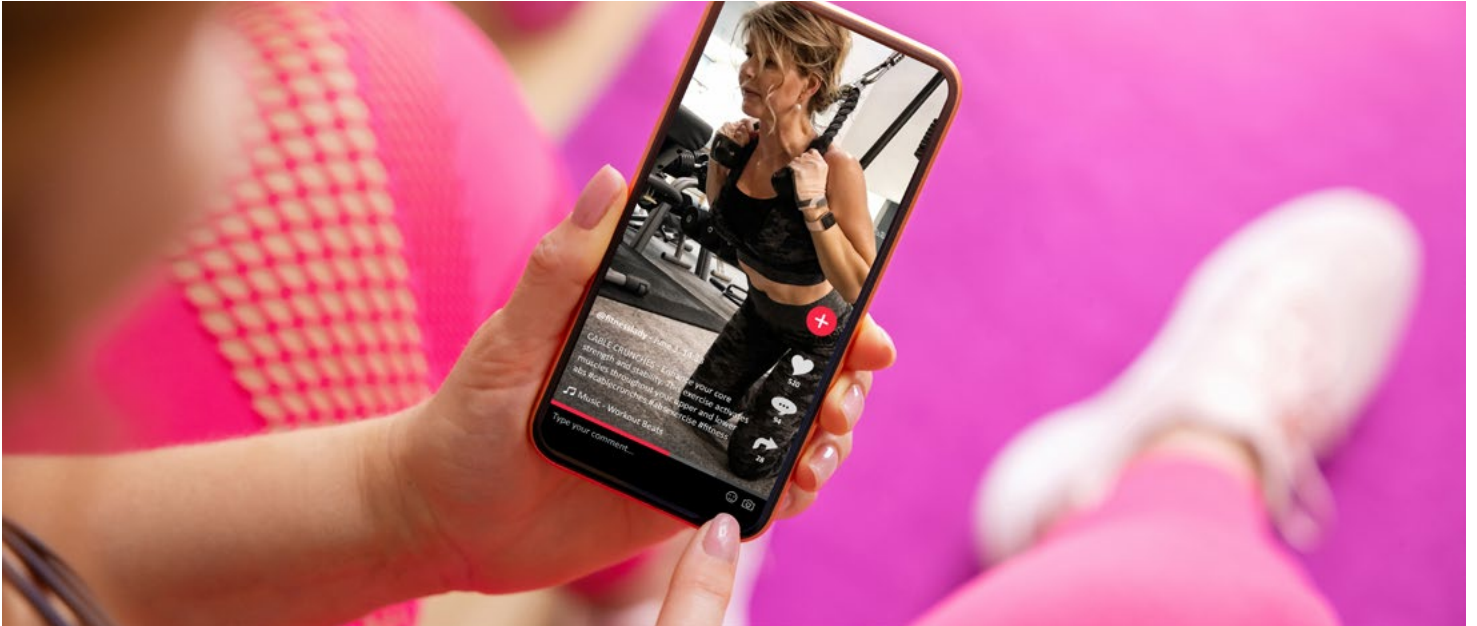




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Social Media Diet and Fitness: Separating the Hype from Healthy Habits

Have you ever found yourself inspired to start a new fitness routine, buy some supplements that are going to completely overhaul your health, or try an amazing new weight-loss recipe after scrolling through Instagram or TikTok? You're not alone. Getting caught up in the latest diet and fitness trends is quite easy. In fact, social media has completely transformed the way we approach fitness, food, and fashion. From images of shredded abs to the benefits of green smoothies, it's overflowing with health advice. With just a few taps on our screens, we can access workouts, diets and eating plans, and chronicles of people's fitness journeys that are meant to inspire us. And while it creates an idealized view of what a healthy person should do, consume and wear, how much of it is actually good for you?

In this article, we'll explore the positive and negative aspects of the diet and fitness content available through social media. We also want to highlight the gap that sometimes exists between expectations and reality. While some of us can view these resources as motivating, they also come with significant downsides that negatively affect our physical and mental well-being. Let's take a realistic look at it so you can feel better equipped to focus on your health and navigate this content more safely and effectively.

The Motivational Power of Social Media

Social media can be a fantastic motivator if you are looking to improve your fitness and diet. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are filled with influencers who share their fitness journeys, offer workout tutorials and tips, provide dietary advice, and post healthy recipes. Seeing other people's success stories and progress can inspire you to hit the gym, try a new workout, or make a lifestyle shift.

Many people who may not feel entirely comfortable publicly sharing their health journeys are attracted to the sense of community social media can offer. While it makes content available to a broader audience, it also is perceived to provide more privacy and anonymity – or participation on the individual's terms. One study from the University of Pennsylvania found that being connected through a social network “proved to be a highly effective way to motivate people to exercise” because participants felt better connected to a network of “like-minded exercise enthusiasts offered support and encouragement.”¹ Facebook groups, for example, provide spaces for people to share their experiences, get advice and develop camaraderie.

Tuning in to see how others in the group are progressing and hearing about their challenges makes getting fit more relatable. It can help you not to feel isolated and alone. Groups can make it easier to stick with your fitness goals – you may even try participating in a fitness challenge that encourages you to push your limits, stay committed, and have fun with some healthy competition.

The Dark Side – Unrealistic and Unhealthy Portrayals and Ethics

Unfortunately, not all aspects of social media are positive. Influencers and celebrities who promote unrealistic body types using filters and photo editing generate much of the online traffic. The false sense of reality and distorted ideals of healthiness and attractiveness may create insecurities where you feel dissatisfied with your body image. You can adopt unhealthy behaviours like extreme dieting and over-exercising, which do more harm than good and put you at risk of injury. Constant exposure to idealized standards can pressure people to conform, potentially causing body dysmorphia and other mental health issues. It's important to remember that these seemingly perfect images often don't reflect reality.

One interesting study conducted with “20 women who self-identified as having a positive body image” looked at their experiences with “appearance-related imagery in their daily lives.”² The researchers found that while these women did not “always feel positive about their bodies, and sometimes the beauty-idea images did impact them,” they could better use internalized protective filters to look at the posts more critically.³ When they determined the underlying motivation, often related to selling products or services, it led to discussions about how aspiring to the “modified images of women’s bodies” would come at a cost, compromising the “precious time and energy [they invest in]... areas of their life that they truly valued” such as spending time with friends and family, focusing on their work and career, participating actively in their communities, and expanding their knowledge through educational endeavours and continuous learning.⁴ While appreciating the “beauty-ideal images as inspiration,” the participants were drawn to “things that could improve their well-being and that they would enjoy – not on their physical appearance – things like practicing yoga or meditation.”⁵

With the commercialization of diet and fitness, many influencers prioritize financial gain over genuine health advice. The ethical issue is that influencers often don't disclose their economic incentives, misleading their followers. This prioritization of profit over well-being and accountability can have serious consequences for their audience.

The Spread of Misinformation

A major issue with social media fitness advice is that not everyone is qualified to give it. Many influencers lack proper credentials, leading to the spread of uneducated advice. It can result in people following harmful fad diets, taking unregulated supplements, and believing fitness myths.

For instance, detoxing, appetite suppression, energy and metabolism boosters, and exercises targeting specific body parts are often criticized as “problem areas” and are promoted without scientific backing. The side effects of these products are usually not disclosed, and influencers use persuasive tactics such as scarcity and urgency to push their sales and receive compensation for high-performing posts. The instant gratification behind social media can lead people to make hasty and uninformed decisions about products that may be more harmful than helpful, both physically and financially, where subscription model contracts for automatic monthly refills and exclusive content are on offer. The risks of damaging mental health from acting on unverified advice are genuine, too, with the potential to develop eating disorders, exercise addiction, depression and anxiety.

Supplements, “including nutritional powders, gummy vitamins, CBD products, etc.” are one product category frequently mentioned on social media that are increasingly problematic, often making grandiose claims and promising unattainable, falsified results. While it is accurate that in specific cases, supplements can be “used to complement cognitive behavioural therapies and prescription medications” as part of an integrated approach to treating mental health, they should only be taken under medical supervision due to potential interactions with medications and health risks. Many people don't realize the importance of disclosing supplement use to their doctors, which can lead to dangerous situations where unregulated and undisclosed ingredients interact with medication and medical tests and affect medical procedures. These products are unregulated and don't fully disclose ingredients. High doses over and above Recommended Daily Intake (RDI) levels, even the seemingly more innocent supplementation of vitamins, minerals, and micronutrients our bodies need, can have toxic effects. Excess amounts can contribute to metabolic diseases, tissue damage, and organ stress. The best way to consume these daily essentials is from food sources rich in “biologically active compounds” that pose little risk of over-consumption.²

The Mental Health Impact

Social media can negatively affect mental health, as an addiction and increasing anxiety, depression, and loneliness.⁶ The constant stream of curated, perfect images can lead to a distorted view of reality. Artificially Intelligent (AI) generated content and enhancement tools add a layer of confusion and complication to an already challenging space. People can become drawn to and crave social validation, inflaming mental health concerns. They compulsively compare themselves to others online, chasing a belief that their lives are unfavourable compared to what they are seeing online.

Content creators, meanwhile, adapt and publish content obsessively to receive favour from algorithms on social media platforms. This can often lead to increased amounts of harmful content being released as influencers try their best to create engaging posts to benefit from these algorithms.

Navigating Social Media Responsibly

To navigate social media responsibly, you can focus on authenticity and balance.

- Follow accounts that promote realistic approaches to health and fitness, emphasizing body positivity and self-compassion.
- Inclusivity and supportive approaches are often clues to content that will be more helpful than harmful.
- Look for influencers focusing on mental and emotional well-being, not just physical appearance.
- Investigate influencers' credentials to ensure they are well-educated and their advice is based on scientific evidence and studies that validate proven effectiveness. Many claim to be experts without proper training, so verifying their qualifications is essential.

The Importance of Professional Guidance

You should always seek professional medical advice from certified healthcare professionals before starting any new diet or fitness regimen. Working with a team of experts, including physicians, pharmacists, kinesiologists, and physiotherapists, can help you better understand how diet and exercise affect your body.

Consider asking specific questions to help ensure your practices are safe and effective.⁷

• What kind of exercise is best for me?⁸

Talk about your fitness goals and be realistic about your abilities. You may need to avoid specific exercises, monitor heart rate activity and blood pressure, or practice modified and pain-free exercises when working out to prevent injury.

• How much regular exercise or activity should I aim for?⁹

Some movement is better than no movement, and you can build up your commitment and stamina as you start to feel stronger and realize the benefits of exercising. Start with two or three days a week, focusing on increasing your heart rate and circulation and incorporating muscle-strengthening movement. Walking is a good example that requires no equipment other than comfortable shoes. Taking exercise "snack" breaks where you fit in some stretches, dancing, or short bursts of movement during the day can help you get there.

• Will exercising affect my medications?¹⁰

If you take medication and want to begin exercising, you may need to adjust dosages or the times you take the medication for it to continue to be most effective. Don't forget to talk about vitamins and supplements you might want to add to your routine, before you buy them.

Social media has changed the fitness and diet landscape, offering opportunities and challenges. You can navigate this content responsibly by recognizing the potential downsides and prioritizing professional advice. Focus on maintaining your mental and physical health to achieve your fitness goals safely.

Remember that as part of your Employee & Family Assistance Program with Homewood, we offer Nutrition Coaching and a "Jumpstart Your Wellness" program, where you can work with professionals to help you set a course for improving your overall health and well-being. Our Lifesmart Coaching program also offers excellent resources.

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