

New diet: Get real to get thin

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By HARRIET GROSS / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Reality – in dieting, at least – is something to be reckoned with. That's the message of Dr. Steven Schnur, a Miami-based, board-certified cardiologist and internist.

"If dieting were easy, we would be a nation of supermodels," he says at the start of this book, recounting the depressing statistics about overweight and obesity that most of us know too well.

His follow-up is a diet that will not please those in search of a quick fix for fat: "I refuse to sacrifice nutrition and exercise standards that are essential for good health."

Those who do not slam the book shut at this uncompromising point may just find a way of eating they can live with for what could be a longer, happier lifetime than expected otherwise.

Counting calories? Of course! But if you choose to get all your daily allotment from chocolate candy, that's not reality! What this doctor orders is a good, old-fashioned balanced diet, "supplemented" once in a while by a bit of a chocolate binge. And what makes this diet different from all its boring forebears is not just permission to eat occasional candy, but the challenge it issues to "develop a new relationship with food, and with your body."

An early chapter, "Myth Versus Reality," goes head-to-head with a lot of beliefs about food and weight loss. Dr. Schnur counters the touted health-producing effects of a low-carb lifestyle with possible dehydration due to rapid water loss, and the bad breath that signals ketosis – the body's breakdown of lean muscle tissue to fuel its energy supply.

He answers claims of high-protein diet effectiveness with negative counter-claims: heightened risk of both kidney problems and osteoporosis. And about the efficacy of losing weight without exercise: "Incredibly unhealthy," Dr. Schnur says. "Exercise is an essential tool for dieters."

His modest prescription: Burn 2,000 calories per week – 300 calories a day – with any kind of exercise you choose.

A diet that requires both physical activity and real attention to food choices and their preparation: What could possibly make this appealing?

The answer is its practicality. Once Dr. Schnur begins to convince his reader that what he says makes good health sense, he moves past theory and into the heart of the book.

First, there's a section to set the stage for success. "Preparing Your Reality Kitchen" is a primer that demystifies label-reading and low-fat cooking, and guides new dieters in stocking their pantries and shelves with necessary staples and utensils.

Then "There's No Such Thing as Cheating" tells how to salve a guilty conscience and keep right on the straight-and-narrow diet path. And the simplest of the simple is Dr. Schnur's 2:90 Rule: any starch that contains at least two grams of fiber (its fat-fighting prowess is emphasized on the book's cover) per 90-calorie serving meets the criteria for good, healthy eating.

The book's centerpiece is eight weeks' worth of full menus for three meals a day, with recipes created by chef Andrew Hunter. All provide essential information on calorie counts and grams of fiber, fat, protein and carbs.

You won't get dessert at lunch and dinner, but you are entitled each day to one "Reality Reward" from a list including cobblers, custards, cookies, even a banana split. There are also dividends – little treats such as a sugar cube, a freezer pop, some grated Parmesan, none more than 20 calories – for inclusion several times daily as meal enhancers. An extensive listing of food equivalents makes possible near-infinite variations on the basic menu offerings.

"Flexible" and "forgiving" are the operative words for the diet itself. For the dieter, they are "dedication" and "persistence."

Dr. Schnur doesn't make any fast and easy promises. After all, he's a cardiologist/internist who's used to dealing with reality: diabetes, heart attack, stroke, and other aftereffects of bad eating. And these are the realities his Reality Diet is designed to change.

E-mail healthyliving@dallasnews.com

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The Reality Diet: Lose the Pounds for Good with a Cardiologist's Simple, Healthy, Proven Plan

Steven A. Schnur, M.D.

Avery/Penguin Group, \$24.95

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