



Harris County Hospital District

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MEDIA RELEASE

Spring Break is Weeks Away, but Beware of Dangerous Crash Diets

HOUSTON (Feb. 18, 2008) – It's still weeks away, but every student has been waiting for spring break and looking forward to their destination getaway – whether it's South Padre Island, Cancun or Miami.

And now the prospect of having to fit in a pair of board shorts or that itchy bitsy teenie weenie bikini may lead students to an unhealthy obsession with shedding pounds the quickest way possible.

But experts at the Harris County Hospital District warn about the negative side effects of spring break crash dieting and quick weight loss gimmicks.

“To lose weight quickly, students may often resort to crash diets, diet pills, excessive exercising, even laxatives and diuretics – all of which are unhealthy and could have lasting side effects,” said Shaynee Roper, clinical nutrition manager.

A crash diet is one of the most restrictive types of weight loss plans. It involves depriving the body of food – often drastically reducing the amount of calories eaten on a daily basis – or of one or more food groups.

Paired with excessive exercise, diet pills, and diuretics, which cause the body to lose needed electrolytes, it is a dangerous combination.

“Every system in the body relies on a good balance of electrolytes and nutrients,” Roper said. “When the nutrients the body needs to function are taken away, it could lead to slow metabolism, dehydration and even permanent damage depending on the length of time on the diet.”

During crash diets, the body realizes it is being starved. As a result, it adjusts its metabolism (the rate at which calories are burned) so that it burns fewer calories to perform bodily functions. The body can maintain a slow metabolism for months, even years. And the slow metabolism actually means that the body is using fewer calories, resulting in a slower weight loss.

Not only will crash dieters lose weight in an unhealthy way, but muscle mass as well.

The body relies on energy from food, and once the body has used all its energy from the food being eaten, it's forced to break down muscle mass for nutrition.

Other side effects from lack of food include blackouts, nausea and headaches.

Another dangerous combination with crash diets occurs when crash dieters drink alcohol and spend time in the sun.

“Because there is less food in their body to counter the effects of alcohol, crash dieters will become drunk a lot faster,” Roper said. “They run the risk of passing out, fainting, suffering alcohol poisoning and becoming severely dehydrated.”

Dehydration can be classified as mild, moderate or severe based on how much of the body’s fluid is lost or not replenished. When severe, dehydration can be life-threatening.

Once the crash dieter returns to their pre-diet habits, usually they’ll regain the weight they initially lost and maybe even a few pounds more due to their decreased metabolism.

So what is the best way to trim down for spring break?

“Sensible eating and moderate exercise,” Roper said. “Women should not cut back to less than 1,200 calories per day and men should not cut back to less than 1,800 calories per day.”

The Harris County Hospital District is the public health care system for the nation’s third most-populous county. It provides almost one million health care visits each year to residents of Harris County. The hospital district operates Ben Taub General Hospital, Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, Quentin Mease Community Hospital, 12 community health centers, a dental center, eight school-based clinics, 13 homeless shelter clinics and four mobile health units.

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