



HEALTHFUL BITES

Meal Replacements

by Vicki Bovee, MS, RD

What is a meal replacement?

- Meal replacements are packaged foods, usually a bar or a beverage, that provides 200 to 300 calories per serving, and are fortified with more than 20 vitamin and minerals to at least 25% of the recommended amount.
- There are frozen and shelf stable dinners that can be used to replace meals, but these are technically not meal replacements, since they are usually not fortified with additional vitamins and minerals.
- Meal replacements are not dietary supplements. Check the label on the product. If it is labeled a dietary supplement, it is not intended for the sole item of a meal or diet.



What are the benefits to using meal replacements to help me manage my weight?

- **Automatic portion control.** The foods are prepackaged and you know how many calories you are eating. We are eating more calories now than in years past, and one reason is that our portions have grown. The more food that is in front of us, the more we eat. There are not any second helpings sitting in the kitchen with a packaged food.
- **Convenience.** Need a fast meal? It doesn't get much faster than opening a can, tearing off a wrapper, whipping up a shake in the blender, or hitting the buttons on a microwave. Some meal replacements are also on-the-go foods so you take them along while running errands, traveling, or just having a busy day.
- **Easy.** Not comfortable in the kitchen? You don't have to know how to cook to use meal replacements. You just need to know how to run the blender and/or microwave.
- **Structure.** Less time is spent thinking about food because you are not having to worry about preparation. If you drink meal replacement beverages, your biggest decision is what flavor you will have. Less time spent thinking about food gives you more time to do other things like taking a walk.

Is there anything I should watch out for if I use meal replacements?

- Even though they may be fortified, they may lack some of the nutrients of whole foods.
- They may be low in fiber. If you are using the packaged dinners, choose meals that are made with whole grains such as whole wheat pasta or brown rice. Check the nutrition facts label for the amount of fiber in your meal replacement.
- Some people may get bored with eating or drinking the same thing for a long period of time.
- Some people don't like the taste of meal replacements.
- Prepared meals tend to be higher in sodium. If you balance out the rest of your food for the day with lower sodium foods, you are likely to meet the 2005 Dietary Guideline of less than 2300mg sodium a day.

How do I use meal replacements sensibly to help me manage my weight?

- Be sure to read the nutrition facts label. It is recommended that you limit the calories to 300 calories or less for weight management. Just because it is a packaged food does not mean it is lower calorie.
- These are MEAL replacements, not snacks. Add some fruit and/or vegetables along with your meal replacement to round out the meal.
- A meal replacement is not an addition to your regular meal. If you are using a liquid meal replacement, it is not the liquid that goes along with your meal. It is your meal.
- If you tend to get bored with eating meal replacements, plan to eat one meal a day of regular food. Practice portion control and choose lower calorie foods.

The use of meal replacements can be effective with managing your weight. The extent to which you use them is up to you.

Eat Smart...



about vicki...

Vicki Bovee, MS, RD, is a registered dietitian/nutritionist with 25 years experience in weight loss and weight management. Vicki and her business partner, Chef Dave Fouts, work together on a variety of projects related to weight loss and bariatric surgery. They have authored a cookbook **90 Ways to Ditch Your Diet**, cookbooks, numerous articles, and newsletters. Vicki has worked with thousands of patients in clinical, research, and business settings to help them manage their weight through lifestyle changes. She is a member of The American Dietetic Association and The American Society of Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery.