

FITNESS & WELL-BEING

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Soak it up

Dietitian Keren Gilbert's hydrophilic diet is a weight-loss plan that really holds water, writes **Jeanette Wang**

Gastric bands, bypasses and balloons; these weight-loss surgeries are among the solutions of last resort for the obese. But rather than go under the knife, a new type of diet could be a safer and more natural option to keep hunger pangs at bay and limit how much you can eat.

Hydrophilic foods may be the answer to achieving lifelong weight loss, suggests dietitian Keren Gilbert, creator of the hydrophilic diet and author of *The HD Diet* that will be published next month.

Hydrophilic is a fancy term for "water loving" – the word originating from the Greek words for water (*hydro*) and friendship (*philia*). Hydrophilic foods, Gilbert says, fill up with water and in turn fill you up, leaving you feeling satisfied.

Before you brush this off as just another fad, she notes that unlike other popular diets such as Atkins and Paleo, the hydrophilic diet plan allows for all food groups, including carbs and fruit. Animal proteins are fine. The foundation of the diet is high-hydrophilic fruits, vegetables, and legumes such as chia seeds, okra, oats, pears, barley, Brussels sprouts, kidney beans, chick peas, oranges and agar.

The secret of these foods lies in what's more commonly known as soluble fibre. "When ingested soluble fibres dissolve they form a gel in our intestines," says Gilbert, a registered dietitian and certified nutritionist from New York state in the US. "The gel is the key to steady blood sugar and thus diminishing cravings, keeping you full, and maintaining digestive health."

Hydrophilic foods shouldn't be confused with foods with high water content such as tomatoes, cucumber, watercress, watermelon and pineapple. Such foods, though "HD friendly", says Gilbert, lack water soluble fibre and will leave you feeling hungry soon after you eat them.

Think of hydrophilic foods as a hard, dry sponge next to your kitchen sink. Add a little water and it's instantly revitalised and ready to use. "The hydrophilic foods on my plan will have the same effect on you," she says.

Chia seeds are "the quintessential hydrophilic food", says Gilbert. A chia seed has the capacity to absorb up to 12 times its weight in water. The high-fibre seeds are native to Mexico and Guatemala, and reportedly were a staple for the Aztecs.

In the Asian diet, hydrophilic foods include snow peas, baak choy, napa cabbage, seaweed, edamame, shirataki noodles and kelp noodles.

Gilbert created the hydrophilic diet in 2010, but the idea of using such water-loving foods to aid weight loss is a little older. Since the mid-2000s, the gelatinous agar has been a dieter's favourite, particularly in Japan.

Called *kanten* in Japanese, agar is derived from red algae and has been popular across Asia for centuries as an ingredient in desserts and to thicken soups, sauces or preserves. At 80 per cent fibre and with virtually no calories, carbs, sugar or fat, it bulks up in the gut and promotes the feeling of fullness.

A study by Japanese researchers published in the journal *Diabetes, Obesity and Metabolism* in 2005 looked at the effect of the kanten diet on obese patients with impaired glucose tolerance and type-2 diabetes. Seventy-six patients were randomly assigned to either a conventional diet or a conventional diet with agar. Both groups were on these diets for 12 weeks. The researchers concluded that the agar diet resulted in marked weight loss due to the maintenance of reduced calorie intake and an improvement in metabolic parameters.

Of course, agar aside, health experts have long espoused the benefits of a diet rich in soluble fibre, not only for weight control, but also to aid in diabetes control and lower LDL ("bad") cholesterol.

Gilbert, however, has sexed up soluble fibre with a fancy name and iPhone app that grades meals according to how hydrophilic they are. In her new book, to be published by health and wellness publishers Rodale, she presents her diet as a total mind-body approach.

"I integrated the metaphorical meaning of the term hydrophilic as well to elicit a change in our state of mind – a necessity when you make a life adjustment," says Gilbert. "The HD diet is logical and spiritual and that is why it works."



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KEREN GILBERT (ABOVE)

Her book offers motivational stories from clients, detailed shopping lists, daily menu templates and a strong emphasis on making healthy decisions for life.

It's best not to overdo fibre, though. Consuming fibre in excess may cause bloating, cramps, gas and diarrhoea, says Charmain Tan, a registered dietitian and founder of Seventeen Nutrition Consultants. She advises that if you're trying to boost fibre in your diet, do it gradually and drink plenty of fluids to help pass the fibre through the digestive system.

The US Institute of Medicine recommends a daily fibre intake of 38 grams and 25 grams respectively for men and women 50 years and younger, and 30 grams and 21 grams per day for those over 50. As a gauge, a tablespoon of chia seeds has five grams and a pear three grams of fibre.

"Unfortunately, none of my clients have eaten enough fibre," says Tan. "Many studies have shown that the general public does not consume enough fibre."

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Some of Gilbert's clients have lost up to 14 kilograms over the 12-week regimen.

"While my clients may lose more or less, as a general rule, 20 to 25 pounds [9kg to 11kg] is a successful weight loss for the 12-week period," Gilbert says.

"The weight absolutely stays off because the HD diet is a lifestyle where habits are relearned; not a fad that is restrictive and unsustainable."

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From top: chia seeds, barley and edamame.

HOME RUN LAMMA ISLAND

In praise of beaches and green



Get off the beaten track and enjoy the trails on Lamma Island. Photos: Tanya Bennett



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Beyond the skyscrapers and traffic-choked streets, Hong Kong is a paradise for runners. On January 25, some 73,000 people will take part in the Standard Chartered Hong Kong Marathon. In the lead-up to the race, local runners will take you on a tour of the city's neighbourhoods, pointing out the best running routes, shops and pit stops. This week, 31-year-old artist Tanya Bennett shows us around Lamma Island.

"Running is a part of who I am and a huge part of my life. The more I run, the more I ask myself, 'How does my life fit into my running schedule?'"

I started trail running in 2012 to even out the excesses of living in Hong Kong. I've since completed over 20 races, many of them ultra marathons (42km).

Lamma Island is the perfect place for a morning run. I leave my house at Yung Shue Wan and within five minutes I'm

running across the beach. A few minutes later, I'm scaling a hill and looking back over Hong Kong Island. Unlike its hilly neighbour Lantau, Lamma doesn't have many significant climbs (except for Mount Stenhouse at 353 metres, which is technically a climb rather than a run). But there are runs here to suit all abilities.

The trails on Lamma are mostly paved, but there are a few lesser-known dirt paths. Over on the less populated side of the island, Sok Kwu Wan, there are some beautiful old villages that make me feel like I have been transported back in time.

My runs on Lamma vary between a flat 5km loop to an arduous 20km tour around the island with a few mini climbs thrown in.

Lamma has an enthusiastic paddling, more than a running culture. But I do know a couple of other runners on the island, and the paths are well trodden by hikers and dog walkers. I would love to see more runners here. It's one of Hong Kong's lesser known running havens.

The best part of running on Lamma is that during Hong Kong's hot and humid summer, there are so many beaches where you can cool down. The views of Hong Kong Island and Lantau at sunrise or sunset make me thankful to live here.

The worst part is the spiders in the summer. The main dirt trail on Lamma (from the wind turbine over to Sok Kwu Wan) is not possible to run from May to October due to the density of spider webs. Spider face plants are an unfortunate side effect of running on Lamma at certain times of the year.

There isn't much in the way of running shops on Lamma, but you can buy nutritional essentials such as energy bars or nut butters at Just Green on Yung Shue Wan Main Street. Otherwise, it's over to the city for sporting essentials.

My favourite running route goes from Yung Shue Wan up to the wind turbine, along to Sok Kwu Wan via a small dirt trail on the right, then the headland loop via Mo Tat Wan and Tung O before climbing up to the radio

tower. I then descend to Mo Tat Wan and run back to Sok Kwu Wan village for a popsicle, before heading back to Yung Shue Wan via the Youth Camp.

After my morning run I like to refuel at Green Cottage. It's a vegetarian cafe with a fantastic range of smoothies, perfect for a pre- or post-run boost.

Running brings me focus and perspective. I get my best ideas for a drawing or a project when I am up on the trails. When life gets tough I remind myself, "I ran 45k that time, at night, with mountains ... meeting this deadline is also completely achievable."

Scan this QR code for a map of Tanya Bennett's favourite running route



We are running an Instagram contest as part of the Home Run Series. Send your best snaps of running in the city by hashtagging your photos with #SCMPHomeRun. Each week, a prize sponsored by Escapade Sports will go to the best photo and caption. Here's the winning photo by @loyd_belcher taken at Sunset Peak. Congratulations! Up for grabs this week is a Compressport On/Off Multisport First Layer long-sleeved shirt (left) valued at HK\$790. Go to scmp.com/topics/home-run for details.