

# Study big on Weight Watchers

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Weight Watchers has seen some lean times, so to speak. The company's decades-old regimen of daily exercise, point-counting and monthly meetings hasn't been able to compete very well with the all-you-can-eat, low-carb diet craze of the past few years, and profits suffered.

But just in time for New Year's resolutions, the Woodbury-based weight-control company may get a boost from a new study that endorses its low-fat diet.

The study of a selection of weight loss programs, scheduled to be published next week in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, found only Weight Watchers had strong documentation that it worked. The report was scheduled for release early next week but was published early by various news services.

The study, along with rising company profits this year and a general waning in the low-carb craze, could mean more Americans are willing to work for weight loss, experts said.

"I don't know if Weight Watchers will grow dramatically, but it has proven through the years to work," said Bob Goldin, executive vice president of Technomic Inc., a Chicago-based food industry research company. Weight Watchers is more of a lifestyle program than other weight loss plans, he said, which could



Weight Watchers chief executive Linda Huett, second from left, during a visit to a Plainview site in 2002, may have more to smile about thanks to a recent study.

come back in style as "common sense is now tending to prevail in dieting."

Part of the difference might be a change in the Weight Watchers formula. Instead of relying on the point system it depended on for more than 40 years, the company in August 2003 launched a response to low-carb plans that eliminated point counting, said spokeswoman Jennifer Mitchell. The

upshot: Profits in the first nine months of this year jumped by a third to \$140 million.

"At New Year's resolution time people flock to our meeting rooms," Mitchell said. "So between the time of the year and the information in the study, we anticipate this being a very successful year."

The study, conducted by the University of Pennsylvania, found that Weight Watchers

clients who attended most group sessions during a two-year period maintained the largest weight loss out of participants in nine other programs, including Jenny Craig and Overeaters Anonymous.

Fewer consumers following low-carb diets could spell trouble for companies such as Ronkonkoma-based Atkins Nutritionals, experts said. "Our sales are still up," said Colette Heimowitz, Atkins vice president of education. "And we're concentrating more on ways for people to make Atkins a lifestyle."

But last month, only 3.6 percent of Americans were on low-carb diets, compared with 9.1 percent at the beginning of the year, according to the NPD Group, a market research firm in Port Washington. Since July, after two years of quick growth, sales of Atkins products dropped 32 percent, according to Chicago-based Information Resources Inc., a market research company, suggesting that low carbs could be losing steam.

"Most health experts have recognized that the low-carb craze is on its way out," said Melinda Johnson, spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "It's not a sustainable way to eat or healthy in the long run. When people want to go on a weight-loss program, I've tended to steer them towards Weight Watchers."