

The Russian Sedentary Diet

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Tim Samuel / pexels

Диета: diet

If there is one word that is immediately understandable in Russian, it's *диета* (diet). Right? Well, mostly right. In English, the most common meaning of the word today is “the restriction of food intake to lose weight,” but it can also mean the food usually consumed by a creature or food prescribed for health purposes, like a low-salt diet.

In Russian *диета* is defined as *специально установленный режим питания* (a specially prescribed regime of food intake). What you eat in that specially prescribed regime might be called *диетическая пища, диетическое питание, диетическая еда* (dietetic food) or *диетические блюда* (dietetic meals).

The only problem is that today in English for most people, the first meaning of diet is what

you do or what you eat to lose weight. If we mean a different kind of diet, English speakers tend to call it a “special diet” for, say, people with diabetes or high blood pressure.

But in Russian the meaning that was more common a few decades ago – a special diet for specific health needs – still floats through the language, causing some confusion for non-natives. A brief look back in history might help to clarify things.

In the old days there were big stores around town called Диета that had food — or rather that usually had food — for people with a variety of ailments or dietary restrictions. Inside you’d find that terrific diet food: highly processed, high-fat колбаса (luncheon meat).

The thing is, докторская колбаса (literally doctor’s luncheon meat), the kind of luncheon meat sold in Диета stores, was in fact developed in 1936 as a dietetic product with lower fat, salt and spice content. It was for больные, имеющие подорванное здоровье в результате Гражданской войны и царского деспотизма (ill people who had ruined their health as a result of the Civil War and tsarist despotism). Compared to other kinds of spicy, salty, smoked, fat-filled колбаса, докторская was positively beneficial — even if you had not suffered from despotic tsars.

Диета wasn’t necessarily the place to go for low-cal treats. As someone recalls: Магазин “Диета” хвастался лакомствами: больше всего мальчику нравилось дрожащее фруктовое желе (The Diet store was famous for its sweets: best of all the little boy liked the quivering fruit jellies).

There were also диетические столовые (dietetic cafeterias) where you were as likely to find high-fat foods as low-fat. Today you can still buy диетические яйца (dietetic eggs). What, might you ask, could make eggs dietetic? Actually, it’s a bit of a scam. They are the same as non-dietetic chicken eggs, just fresher: Диетические — это яйца сроком до 7 дней, столовые — до 25 суток. Больше отличий нет. (Dietetic eggs are eggs that are no more than 7 days old, and regular eggs are up to 25 days old. There is no other difference.)

Buyer be informed.

There are other puzzles in Russian dietetic jargon, for example, постное мясо (Lenten meat). Since most Russian Orthodox fasts exclude meat, fish, dairy, olive oil and alcohol, you might think that “Lenten meat” was a vegan product made out of soy or buckwheat groats. But no. It’s мясо без жировых прослоек (meat without streaks of fat) and includes everything from индейка и курица (turkey and chicken) to вырезка баранины и свинины (filet of lamb and pork). In English, постное мясо is just lean meat.

This is a good reminder that пост (a fast) is not диета (a diet). In the famous words of a friend — who might have been quoting someone: Пост ☒ это от Бога, а не диета от тёти Маши (A fast is from God. It’s not a diet from your Aunt Mary).

If you are looking for “diet foods” in the sense of low-calorie or low-fat foods, look for the magic adjectives низкокалорийный (low-calorie) or обезжиренный (no-fat, fat free).

Russian consumers, not to mention доктора (doctors) and диетологи (nutritionists), are concerned about вредные жиры (harmful fats) and will tell you: Самые ценные для

организма жиры есть в нерафинированных растительных маслах, орехах, семенах, авокадо, жирной рыбе (The best fats for the body are in unrefined plant oils, nuts, seeds, avocado and oily fish).

And as you try to fill your basket with all those good foods, remember the abbreviation БЖУ: считать калории БЖУ — белки, жиры, углеводы (count PFC calories – protein, fat and carbohydrates).

And then, go on a diet.

In Russian, curiously, you sit down on a diet and then sit on it until you lose weight — a very sedentary way to take off the kilos. Садиться/сесть (to go on a diet, literally “to sit down”) and сидеть/посидеть (to be on a diet, literally “to sit”).

Dieting is easy when you're a teenager: За последние 2-3 недели я располнела сильно; сдам экзамены ☒ на диету сяду и снова стану тоненькой-тоненькой (Over the last 2-3 weeks I put on a lot of weight. I'll take my exams, then go on a diet and once again be thin as a reed).

When you're on a diet, it's also easier if you eliminate temptation: Хлеба у меня нет. На диете сижу (I don't have any bread. I'm on a diet).

The goal of your diet is худеть/похудеть (to get thinner, lose weight). But as everyone knows, it's not easy: Мало — начать худеть, важно ведь продержаться (It's not enough to start to lose weight, you need to keep at it).

To keep at it, you need the big picture, contained in another weight-watcher abbreviation: ЗОЖ, that is, здоровый образ жизни (a healthy lifestyle). ЗОЖ – это не временная мера, когда нужно напрячь все ресурсы организма, чтобы сбросить за определенный срок нужное количество килограммов (A healthy lifestyle is not a temporary measure when you need to exert all your body's resources to lose a certain number of kilograms in a certain time period). It's also not for everyone: Ему наплевать на пропаганду ЗОЖ и устрашающие наклейки на пачках сигарет (He didn't give a crap about healthy lifestyle propaganda and the scary stickers on cigarette packs).

And it's easy to ignore most of the time: ЗОЖ, он как огнетушитель на стене — все знают, как он необходим, но вспоминают только в случае крайней необходимости (A healthy lifestyle is like the fire extinguisher hanging on the wall: everyone knows that it is essential, but they remember it only when they really need it).

Unfortunately, nothing changes human nature.

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