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THE
SCIENCE OF
**WEIGHT
LOSS**

COACHMENTS

14



CHAPTER 1 *The Number on the Scale*

8 | **THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS**

There is no magic pill for weight loss—it's about finding the strategies that work best for you.

14 | **UNSCRAMBLING OUR OBSESSION WITH WEIGHT LOSS**

Unpacking the societal pressures that fuel Americans' desire to lose weight.

20 | **WHAT MAKES PEOPLE GAIN... AND LOSE**

Detailing the biological processes that contribute to weight maintenance.



88

CHAPTER 2 *The Truth About Weight Loss*

32 | **WHY ALL CALORIES ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL**

There's much more to shedding pounds than burning more calories than you are eating.

36 | **THE PERILS OF PROCESSED FOODS**

Packaged fare can drive weight gain in multiple ways—avoiding it is a smart first step toward your goals.

CHAPTER 3 *The Food We Eat*

54 | **SHRINKING YOUR EATING WINDOW**

Get the facts on intermittent fasting, how it can help support weight loss and whether it can work for you.

58 | **FAVORING FATS**

The controversial ketogenic diet has helped countless people hit their weight goal. Could it be the solution that you're looking for? Here's where you'll find out.

CHAPTER 4 *Living at Your Happy Weight*

78 | **WHY EXERCISE MATTERS**

While the calories you burn working out won't drive serious weight loss, the side effects of exercise might.

84 | **5 WAYS SLEEP CAN HELP YOU SHED POUNDS**

Catching quality zzz's every night plays a critical role in your get-leaner journey.

88 | **SLOW DOWN**

A mindful eating practice may help you forge a stronger connection with your body and teach you why you choose the foods you do.

26

26 | **DOUBLE STANDARD**

It's an unfortunate truth: Male and female bodies respond to diet and exercise differently.



38 | **STRATEGICALLY SELECTING SWEETS**

You don't need to deprive yourself of dessert entirely—the trick is choosing the right treats to eat at the right times.

42 | **WHY AM I ALWAYS HUNGRY?**

Hunger isn't just a feeling meant to torture you. If you can learn to listen to what it's saying, it can help you make better decisions.

44 | **STRESS AS SABOTEUR**

Physical and emotional stress are key contributors to weight gain. Learn how to sidestep them on your path to slim and healthy.

48 | **DIET FAQs**

Answers to all of the most-asked questions about the foods, drinks, tricks and strategies used to trim inches.

62 | **PRIORITIZING PRODUCE**

Discover why a plant-based diet may be the key to helping you reduce your weight while also making you healthier overall.

66 | **SHEDDING POUNDS FAST**

Advice from the pros on whether those oft-publicized cleanses can really help you drop a size in no time at all.

68 | **THE 25 BEST FOODS TO HELP YOU LOSE**

Fill your plate with these tasty picks and you'll be well on your way to your weight goal.



92 | **MY SLOW AND STEADY JOURNEY**

Hear from five people who changed their lives—and improved their health—their own way.

*Your scale can be
a powerful tool, but
it's not the only
thing that matters.*



[CHAPTER 1]

THE NUMBER ON THE SCALE

Discover why it's not changing the way you want it to, the bodily processes that influence it and how our view of weight as a country has changed over time.

[THE NUMBER ON THE SCALE]



THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Research shows that when it comes to weight loss, there's not just one path that everyone should take. Finding the strategies that work for your body can help you achieve your unique goals. Here's how. BY JENNIFER JOSEPH

What's the best way to lose weight? The answers may surprise you: Read on for more.

Over the last century, countless doctors and nutritionists have advised people looking to lose weight to “eat less and move more.” Sure, many other popular diet approaches (hello, low-fat, low-carb and keto) have cycled from fad to foe to fad again, but the reigning belief has long been that anyone who is serious about slimming down can, if they simply shrink their portion sizes and hit the gym more often.

Yet as straightforward as that solution seems, waistlines have steadily swelled year after year. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an estimated 42% of adults and 20% of children and adolescents in the United States struggle with obesity (as well as health issues, including a heightened risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers that come along with the excess pounds). The COVID-19 pandemic likely helped push those numbers even higher. In the American Psychological Association's 2022 “Stress in America” survey, 47% of adults said they have been less active than they wanted to be since the beginning of the pandemic, and 58% reported experiencing undesired weight changes, with those who gained weight putting on an average of 26 pounds.

This growing public health crisis has fueled a booming multimillion-dollar industry: The research firm Future Market Insights reported that weight loss services, supplements and diet programs in the U.S. were expected to bring in an estimated \$250 billion in sales in 2022 alone.

Despite the hundreds of weight loss programs available, shockingly few people who set out to lose weight find lasting success. What gives? “There's a dogmatic belief in our society that it's ‘your fault’ if you have obesity, and that belief has led to the persistence

of simplistic recommendations such as ‘eat less, move more’ that rely completely on personal accountability and choice. But it’s just not that easy,” asserts Dr. Drew Sayer, an assistant professor with the University of Alabama at Birmingham department of nutrition sciences. “The problem with this simplistic approach is that it completely fails to consider the complex biology that underlies our appetite and eating behavior. Layer on a host of environmental and social pressures that encourage unhealthy eating and inactivity, and it’s no surprise that losing weight—and especially keeping the weight off—is exceedingly difficult for most people.”

THE BIOLOGICAL WEIGHT LOSS TRAP

Thousands of studies have examined the effectiveness of various diet approaches ranging from low-fat and intermittent fasting to Paleo and keto, but the most consistent conclusion is that they all work to some degree... at least in the short term. “Some studies have shown that certain specific approaches might have some added benefit early on, but the majority of the research shows that adherence, regardless of the specific diet pattern, is still the best predictor of long-term success,” notes Sayer. Individual responses to specific diets can vary widely, likely due to differences in genetics and other metabolic factors. So while your next-door neighbor might have success on a keto diet, you feel more energized and see the number on the scale drop more steadily eating a high-carb, plant-based diet.

If you do manage to find a diet that works for your body, there are still likely to be challenges ahead. In the weeks and months after initial weight loss, most people notice the weight starting to creep back on, notes Dr. Kevin Hall, a researcher at the National

Institutes of Health (NIH). He points to a meta-analysis of 29 long-term weight loss studies in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, which found that dieters typically regain more than 50% of weight lost within two years, and 80% of the weight they dropped after five years.

“Body weight is determined by genes to a large extent, and these genes play a role in how brain regions like the hypothalamus and basal ganglia dictate your appetite and metabolism. These mechanisms are rooted in survival and they are happening outside of your conscious control,” explains Hall. “In the same way that if you hold your breath, your

‘THERE’S A DOGMATIC BELIEF IN OUR SOCIETY THAT IT’S “YOUR FAULT” IF YOU HAVE OBESITY. [BUT] THIS APPROACH FAILS TO CONSIDER THE COMPLEX BIOLOGY THAT UNDERLIES OUR APPETITE AND EATING BEHAVIOR.’

—Drew Sayer, PhD

body will eventually make you pass out and take back control over your breathing, you can cut calories or carbs, and exercise a little more. But over time, the physiological processes that are trying to regulate body weight kick in to pull you back to where you started by increasing appetite or slowing your metabolism.”

This mechanism can set up a cycle of yo-yo dieting that often leaves people heavier than when they first started dieting, adds Dr. Tim Spector,

a professor of genetic epidemiology at King’s College of London. “We’ve done studies following identical twins over 20 years, and in cases where one twin’s weight cycles up and down and the other stays constant, the yo-yo dieter always ends up worse off,” says Spector, who heads up TwinsUK, a registry dedicated to researching the link between genes, environment and common health concerns. “The brain can’t tell the difference between calorie restriction due to starvation and dieting to lose weight, and over time, this can change the balance of metabolism.”

Ultimately, people who are fighting a battle against extra pounds need tools that go beyond the standard eat less/move more advice, notes Sayer. “Diet and/or exercise programs need to have a strong foundation in behavioral science to have much chance of success, and that still won’t be enough for many people, regardless of their weight status or if losing weight is even a goal of theirs.”

UNCOVERING THE SECRETS OF THOSE WHO KEEP IT OFF

For all the biological odds stacked against weight loss success, there are many people who do manage to lose weight and maintain that loss long term. Uncovering what exactly allows successful slimmers to keep off the pounds has been the primary goal of the National Weight Control Registry (NWCR) for the past 29 years. To qualify for the registry, members must have lost at least 30 pounds and maintained that weight loss for a year or longer. The pandemic has stalled recruitment strategies, but today, the nonprofit registry includes over 13,000 volunteers from across the U.S., with an average weight loss of 66 pounds.

Researchers who analyze data from the NWCR have yet to find any



Finding the diet that works for you can take some trial and error, but the people who are most successful at losing weight and keeping it off prioritize consistency and avoid splurges.

holy grail for weight loss success. Instead, everyone's path looks a little different, notes Dr. J. Graham Thomas, a professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown Alpert Medical School, who oversees the NWCR. He stresses that finding the right diet can take some trial and error. "Few NWCR participants report achieving long-term weight loss success on their first try. More typically, it takes several attempts before someone

finds an approach that they can stick with," Thomas notes. "It's hard to predict what's going to work best for any given individual and it may take several tries before achieving long-term success. It's important to keep that in mind and not get too discouraged if a given approach doesn't work out."

The data also suggests there's no real secret to maintaining weight loss over the years—beyond continued

hard work and determination. But there are a few constants. "More recent studies show that NWCR members tend to have a morning chronotype—they are 'morning people' who wake up early and go to bed early—and they are more likely to use health tracking technology," says Thomas. "NWCR members also typically exercise at least 200 minutes per week, they eat a consistent diet with limited variety and avoid



In researching the most effective strategies, scientists are starting to value perceived happiness and satisfaction as much as changes in weight loss and health outcomes.

splurging on weekends and holidays, and they regularly weigh themselves to catch and correct small weight gains early.”

THE FUTURE OF WEIGHT LOSS

Scientists are getting closer to being able to pinpoint exactly which dietary interventions people will respond to using new technology and testing tools. For instance, now that blood sugar testing has become more affordable and accessible, it can be used to help people understand how their body responds to carbs, says Spector, a co-founder of the personalized nutrition app ZOE. His team recently published a study in the journal *Nature Metabolism* that showed how variations in blood sugar response can drive up hunger and promote weight gain.

In the study, researchers had over 1,000 participants eat a muffin standardized to provide specific amounts of carbs, fat and protein each day, and tracked their blood sugar response using stick-on glucose monitors. They found that one in four people simply processed carbs faster, which caused their blood sugar to dip significantly 2 to 4 hours after eating. These people were hungry sooner and consumed an average of 300 calories more over the course of the day than people who had the smallest post-muffin blood sugar dips. “So you can follow a calorie-controlled diet, but if you’re one of the people who has these dips in response to carbs, you’re going to be hungry earlier than other people and it’s going to make it much harder to stop yourself from overeating,” says Spector. Apps such as ZOE and DayTwo offer blood sugar testing, which then allows the program’s algorithm to create personalized meal plans for your specific metabolic profile.

Spector and his team of researchers are also exploring the potential of microbiome testing for personalized nutrition. Scientists now know that each person's microbiome (that is, the billions of microbes that line our gut and other tissues) is unique and that what we eat heavily influences its makeup. Eat the right kind of foods (namely, fiber-rich whole grains, fruits and vegetables), and you can foster friendly flora that help boost metabolism, improve immunity and regulate appetite and blood sugar. Diets high in processed foods, on the other hand, promote bacteria types that can drive up cravings and increase inflammation in the body.

Emerging microbiome tests promise to sequence bacteria found in saliva or fecal samples and show the proportion of "good" and "bad" bugs in your system. The results may offer clues as to whether you need to make microbiome-friendly changes to your diet, such as increasing your fiber intake, consuming more fruits and vegetables or reducing your sugar intake. It's worth noting that microbial communities respond rapidly to diet changes—in as little as three days, per research in *Nature*. That means you don't necessarily need to wait for a microbiome test to make positive changes for your overall health.

As promising as these new technologies are, Hall cautions that they might not tell the complete story about what it takes to successfully lose weight. "Unfortunately, what we don't even know yet is whether or not there are other factors beyond the microbiome, your genes or your blood glucose levels that are responsible or play a bigger role," muses Hall. "For example, a person who was successful on diet 'A' might have been equally successful on diet 'B,' and what drove their success was the fact that they had a stable job, they had a supportive

'A PERSON WHO WAS SUCCESSFUL ON DIET "A" MIGHT HAVE BEEN EQUALLY SUCCESSFUL ON DIET "B," AND WHAT DROVE THEIR SUCCESS WAS THE FACT THAT THEY HAD A STABLE JOB, A SUPPORTIVE PARTNER AND THEY GOT HELP STICKING TO IT.'

—Kevin Hall, PhD

partner, and they had the wherewithal to get help sticking to this lifestyle change, whereas a person that didn't do as well didn't have that same sort of social or support structure. Maybe they were stressed at work or lost their job or were going through a divorce. We actually don't know the relative importance of these things."

Perhaps that's why more and more obesity researchers are calling for programs that take a whole-person approach that incorporates behavioral science, psychology and budget considerations as well as biology. That's the idea behind SMART (Sequential Multiple Assignment Randomized Trial) studies being done at the University of Alabama. "The overall goal of a SMART trial is to develop adaptive treatment strategies. In other words, what should a health care provider do next if the initial treatment strategy didn't produce the desired results? Clinicians make these decisions all the time in their practices, but the evidence base for when, how and under what circumstances to alter treatment—especially for behavioral interventions—is surprisingly weak,"

explains Sayer. This type of research is increasingly popular in mental health care, where patients often need to try several medications to find the right treatment protocols, but Sayer also sees huge potential for obesity. "A SMART design builds in a predetermined time point where we identify participants as responders or nonresponders to their initial interventions. The responders keep going and the nonresponders are randomized to a second set of interventions that either increase the intensity, augment or completely change the treatment."

These studies are designed to help participants identify obstacles to their success and guide them toward solutions. "Importantly this approach values outcomes such as happiness and satisfaction as much as 'traditional' outcomes such as blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol. Maybe the most important aspects of our approach are self-efficacy—the individual chooses which areas of their lifestyle they want to focus on—and de-emphasizing weight loss as the outcome of the program," notes Sayer. "While we certainly recognize that weight loss can be an extremely effective intervention strategy for improving health and well-being, we also believe that it should not be treated as an outcome independent of improvements in overall wellness and that wellness can be achieved by anyone, regardless of their weight."

Ready to dive further into all the different aspects that influence health, wellness and weight loss success? You've come to the right place. In the pages of this magazine, you'll find more information on why calorie counting doesn't work, how stress can impede weight loss, and answers to the most common weight loss-related questions. Plus you'll learn the study-proven strategies that can put you on the path to success.



After losing over 100 pounds, Richard Simmons opened his Slimmons fitness studio in 1974, focused around weight loss.

UNSCRAMBLING OUR OBSESSION WITH WEIGHT LOSS

*For a long time now, Americans have been fixated on thinness.
Is that finally changing?* BY AUDREY D. BRASHICH

Pills, laxatives, gastric bypass surgery—these are just some of the many products and techniques used in our society’s seemingly relentless and never-ending quest to lose weight. But when did we become a culture obsessed with slimming down no matter the risks or health ramifications? Here’s a primer on how—and some possible answers to the question: *OK, so what now?*

HOW WE GOT HERE

When it comes to our culture’s attitudes toward food and weight loss, there’s

a lot to digest. History, technological progress, fashion—they all play a part. First off, an emphasis on thinness is nothing new. In fact, weight loss techniques and the appreciation of slim bodies have percolated through our culture for centuries thanks to the ancient Greeks (who celebrated fit, healthy bodies) and the Victorians (who used corsets to create a slimmer waist while emphasizing the bust and hips).

Our contemporary thinking around food, bodies and weight loss is also closely related to the social changes set in motion following the Second

World War. Earlier in the 1900s, the goal was getting enough food, explains Dr. Melissa Wdowik, a North Carolina-based registered dietitian nutritionist and nutrition scholar who addresses the disconnect between the history of dieting, the obesity epidemic and helping clients adopt healthy lifestyles. “In that era, food was nourishment and you ate what you could,” Wdowik notes.

But that shifted as convenience foods—processed fare that’s packaged and tends to be loaded with extra sugars, salt and preservatives—started to become more widely accessible,



The diet industry has often centered around fast-fix plans suggesting nutrition habits that were difficult to maintain.



Oprah Winfrey touting her 67-pound weight loss in 1988.

completely changing how, what and when we eat. “Food went from being something that was consumed at the table at mealtimes to being available everywhere,” says Wdowik, noting that now people could find snacks in vending machines in schools, offices and gas stations. Around the same time, big budget food advertising (think slick television commercials and giant billboards) became a thing, and changes brought about by ongoing industrialization led to a less active lifestyle. How much less active? Well, since 1950, jobs have become 83% more sedentary with less than 20% of jobs classified as “physically active”—and sitting for long periods of time is associated with heart disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer, not to mention weight gain.

A RECIPE FOR DISASTER

These changes created an “obesogenic environment.” And this environment led to—no surprise here—more eating. In fact, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) found that Americans in 2010 were eating 1,000 more calories per day than they did 100 years earlier. Between 1970 and 2010, our caloric intake increased by 23%. In addition, processed food has gone from comprising less than 5% of our diets to more than 60% of it over the last 200 years. Our intake of sugar-sweetened beverages full of empty calories increased 356%.

The result? Big changes in body shapes. Between 1976 and 1980, there was a more than 30% increase in overweight Americans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that men between the ages of 40 and 49 were nearly 27 pounds heavier in 2002 than they were in 1960; women in the same age bracket were about 25½ pounds heavier between those time periods. By 1997, the World



When The Biggest Loser premiered in 2004, it was hailed as revolutionary and inspiring. Now we know that the extreme methods used on the show almost always resulted in contestants regaining the weight they lost—or more, in some cases.

Health Organization (WHO) declared an obesity epidemic, and a study released in 2018 shows that the average American woman now wears a size 16 to 18.

HOOKED ON THINNESS

In response to these fluctuations, our culture developed a full-blown obsession with losing weight. Skinny became synonymous with beautiful, and the actresses and models who were able to personify this beauty ideal seemingly without effort were celebrated as heroes. “We developed a collective belief that being thin and losing weight are keys to happiness and a sense of belonging,” says Dr. Alison Ross, a licensed psychotherapist, certified eating disorder specialist and author of *Non-Dieting: How to Love Your Body and Be Healthy in Diet Culture*. Ross argues that what evolved is a class system around body types, with thin bodies at the top of the food chain. “Other body types and the people living in them came to be considered not as good or healthy,” she adds. “Not as worthy.”

A connection between thinness and discipline also reentered into popular thought, making it seem that the only thing preventing anyone from being a size 0 was hard work. “We’ve been taught to believe that anyone who gets really serious about diet and exercise can attain that rare body type,” says Ross. “There’s an idea of *my weight is my choice*.” And that’s a tragedy since experts have learned that thin doesn’t always equal healthier, and being overweight, but not obese, can be linked to a lower mortality rate. It might sound paradoxical since there’s long been a presumed link between being overweight and increased health risks, but what’s emerging is a paradigm that suggests healthy behaviors (such as good eating habits and regular physical exercise) matter more than the numbers on the scale.



Kate Moss on the Gucci runway in 1996.

“Diet dogma says that thinner people are healthier and bigger people are less healthy. But it’s not as simple as that,” says Ross. “We cannot actually know a person’s health status by looking at them from the outside and judging by their size or shape. Instead, we need to look inside the body via lab work, etc.” That’s where the real story about our health is told.

Nonetheless, the mad dash to emulate a thin beauty ideal led to a rise in incidences of eating disorders such as anorexia (self-starvation) and bulimia (binge eating followed by detrimental attempts to compensate for overeating via fasting, excessive exercise and

purging) during the 1970s and ’80s. It also helped foment the modern diet industry. Gimmicky fad diets such as the grapefruit diet (eating the citrus fruit with every meal to help digest fat) and the cabbage soup diet (which restricted calorie intake by focusing on low-sugar vegetables and flushing the body with fiber) gained new popularity and visibility. In addition, support groups and programs such as WeightWatchers and Jenny Craig, plus appetite suppressants such as Dexatrim and meal replacement shakes such as SlimFast all became popular, normalizing increasingly zealous tactics for shedding pounds.

Today, 45 million Americans diet annually and the \$71 billion diet industry is more pervasive than we even realize. Meal services, food tracking apps, medical weight loss procedures, physician-approved eating plans, a large part of the fitness industry—they're all a part of it and ostensibly work together to give us what we want, i.e., a path to weight loss. But what about what *they* want? “The diet industry wants us to continue to buy its diets, food, drugs and accessories—and then fail anyway,” explains Dr. Louise Foxcroft, author of *Calories & Corsets: A History of Dieting Over 2,000 Years*. It's a cynical take, but think about it: If we actually achieved the goal of losing weight and keeping it off, it follows that the diet industry would slim down pretty fast.

GOING FORWARD

So where are we today—and how can you develop a healthy relationship to food and weight loss goals? Start by understanding that the diet industry and diet culture likely aren't going anywhere. Instead, they're evolving to offer increasingly sophisticated goods and services such as nutritional advice based on individuals' microbiome composition and metabolism hacking devices that promise to help burn fat plus boost energy. The wellness industry, which incorporates weight loss adjacent concerns such as more mindful living and better appearance through supplements and nonsurgical procedures, is also booming, currently estimated at \$1.5 trillion dollars with annual growth from 5% to 10%.

But that doesn't mean change is impossible. Pop culture beauty ideals are constantly evolving and have shifted toward embracing those with athletic physiques, such as Venus and Serena Williams, as strong role models. Furthermore, the Body Positive movement (which



For decades, people's weight and their decision whether or not to try to slim down has been treated more like a social issue than a health-based one.

‘DIET DOGMA SAYS THAT THINNER PEOPLE ARE HEALTHIER AND BIGGER PEOPLE ARE LESS HEALTHY. BUT IT’S NOT AS SIMPLE AS THAT.’

—Alison Ross, PhD

launched primarily on social media) has broadened definitions of beauty because independent creators—rather than legacy brands or media outlets—have chosen which body shapes they'd like to spotlight in their content. Another hopeful data point: A 2022 survey of over 200,000 Americans from the Mayo Clinic found that 83% now cite better health as their main motivation for dieting rather than weight loss, which suggests that being thin is less of a priority now than it was in the not-too-distant past.

The key to losing weight the right way, says Ross, is focusing on what we *can* change—like our perspectives—rather than what we can't. Instead of tapping into the “hive mind” or crowdsourcing for information about diets and food behaviors, which can leave us “confused and stressed, plus worried that we're doing everything wrong and not living up to external standards,” Ross suggests getting in touch with your “inner

wisdom.” “Ask yourself questions such as *Am I hungry? How did I know that? Do I want something cold or warm? Savory or crunchy?*” says Ross. Then make decisions about food and weight that are right for *you*, regardless of what others are doing. Another tip: Tune out diet culture chatter such as Instagram inspo reels and before-and-after photos, which have been proven to negatively affect both body image and mental health.

When it comes to actual weight loss strategies, Wdowik recommends a back-to-basics approach. “We have the science and knowledge at this point to know how to live a healthy life,” she explains, underscoring that excess sugar, salt and red meat are proven to contribute to disease, while fruits, vegetables and legumes help fight it, as do eating in moderation, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep. Other useful tactics include meal prepping healthy, balanced meals and lifestyle adjustments to manage stress.

A tried-and-true approach to weight loss might not be sexy, says Foxcroft, but it works. “There's no six-week routine to follow or a club to join. And there aren't any celebrities endorsing it that you can aspire to be like.” Nonetheless, it offers the best chance of maintaining a healthy weight without health risks and a life spent chasing unattainable ideals. Which, after a few centuries of toxic obsession, sounds pretty great.

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE GAIN... AND LOSE

While most of us can name at least one unhealthy practice that contributes to a weight increase and a couple of strategies that will help move the scale downward, there's a lot going on behind the scenes that leads to these results. Here, top experts break it all down. BY MELISSA SORRELLS

Straight talk: The obesity rate in America is out of control. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the number of obese Americans increased by 12% from 2017 to 2020—that's nearly 40 million more people tipping the scales in a dangerous way. Meanwhile, the number of severely obese adults increased 4.5% (or by 11.6 million) during the same time. Despite the protestations of our doctors and the prevalence of diet foods and books, Americans just seem unable to get a handle on how to lose weight and keep it off.

"The conventional formula is failing," says Dr. Sara Gottfried,

director of Precision Medicine at the Marcus Institute of Integrative Health and the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Women, Food, and Hormones*. "Your diet and activity levels are paramount in the battle against the bulge, but it's more complicated than just calories in versus calories out."

So why *do* so many of us feel helpless in the face of those excess pounds? Let's pull back the curtain.

PROBLEM HORMONE HAVOC

"Hormones are chemical messengers—think of them as text messages sent around your body," explains Gottfried. "When they are in order, you can reach

a healthy weight and maintain it. You don't feel cranky, anxious and fat."

But your hormones can be impacted by a million different factors—everything from poor diet and chemicals in common household products to stress, alcohol and even your genes. And once they're pulled out of proper working order, which only takes exposure to one of those factors, hormones begin sending weird and wild messages that confuse the body and form the perfect





**‘THE
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TOXIC HUNGER.’**

—Joel Fuhrman, MD



environment for creating weight gain.

“Several hormones are involved in the amount of fat carried on the body: insulin, cortisol, thyroid, testosterone, estrogen, progesterone, growth hormone and leptin,” says Gottfried. “There are many common hormone problems that lead to weight loss resistance.”

An imbalance of insulin is probably the worst culprit. The hormone is responsible for helping fuel get into cells to be burned. But when it’s not working properly, fuel can’t get to the furnaces, and ends up getting stored as extra fat. And that’s just one example of how a hormone imbalance leads to weight gain.

“As a physician and a woman, I’m all too familiar with the vicious cycle of body dissatisfaction, stress and weight gain. Women who struggle with extra weight, even a small number of pounds, often find themselves locked in a battle with their body,” says Gottfried. “In a sad, ironic twist, this self-objectification can lead to higher stress levels, even more hormone imbalance and weight gain.”

PROBLEM DIET DISASTER

The problem with the Standard American Diet, as it’s known, is twofold. For starters, Americans don’t eat enough healthy, whole foods. According to a 2022 study by the Centers for Disease Control, about 88% of Americans fail to consume the minimum daily recommended intake of fruit; 90% of Americans do not eat enough vegetables.

What’s worse: Most of us replace the fruits and veggies that *should* be in our



Most of the Standard American Diet is made up of processed foods.

diet with unhealthy processed foods. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 57% of our daily calories come from processed foods. And that sets us up to fail—big-time.

“The unhealthy foods at the center of the Standard American Diet are addictive, leading to cravings and toxic hunger,” explains Dr. Joel Fuhrman, president of the Nutritional Research Foundation and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The End of Dieting*. “As a result, we are

‘WOMEN WHO STRUGGLE WITH EXTRA WEIGHT, EVEN A SMALL NUMBER OF POUNDS, OFTEN FIND THEMSELVES LOCKED IN A BATTLE WITH THEIR BODY.’

—Sara Gottfried, MD

almost forced to eat too frequently in order to lessen the withdrawal symptoms from our low nutrient diet. Becoming overweight becomes inevitable.”

The processed food industry has filled grocery stores with items that are literally designed to make us feel hungry so we eat more and more, enriching their bottom lines while increasing our waistlines. “In the Western world, we have extended access to unhealthy food; nutrient-deficient processed food seems to be everywhere we turn,” Fuhrman continues. “In such an environment, it can be easy to become addicted, progressively gain weight and suffer serious health consequences.”

PROBLEM MOVEMENT MISFIRES

Humans are meant to be active, constantly moving creatures. But just as our modern world has given us household chemicals that create hormone havoc and processed foods that cause diet disasters, it’s also given us comfy couches and hours and hours (and hours) of television shows to stream. Unfortunately, this leads to weight gain in two key ways.

First, the body burns the most calories when it’s in motion. Yes – even though calories in, calories out is not the primary driver of weight loss, making sure you’re burning them by moving your body is still important. If you eat a few thousand calories of chips during a *Law & Order* marathon, you have no choice but to get moving to burn some of that off or it’ll get stored as fat.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the body moves fat and toxins throughout the body by way of

the lymphatic system. The system is similar to the cardiovascular system in that it's a web of vessels that extends throughout the body, but it doesn't have a primary pump, like the heart.

"What moves the lymph through its many ducts and channels is exercise," explains Dr. Ann Louise Gittleman, nutritionist and the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Radical Metabolism*. "Mother Nature was so sure we'd be constantly moving that she seems to have assumed that the lymph system could rely on voluntary activity. She didn't count on 80-hour workweeks and 24-hour cable television."

When we don't move enough and lymph can't flow properly, excess fluids build up, leading to bloated, inflamed tissues. What's more, if the fluid isn't moving, fatty acids can't travel to be burned for fuel and toxins can't be removed from the body. The result: The body is forced to store both in temporary, emergency fat cells.

Thankfully, it is relatively easy to reverse weight gain and drop excess pounds for good. And—great news!—these fixes below build upon each other, creating a virtuous cycle that makes weight loss easier over time.

FIX COME CLEAN

You are confronted with thousands of toxins each day, including pesticides and herbicides, as well as chemicals lurking in the fire-retardant materials in couches, the linings of tuna fish cans, face creams, cleaning supplies, prescription drugs—the list goes on. Every

time you are in close proximity to these toxins, they have the opportunity to slow your metabolism, increase inflammation, increase the workload of your liver and damage enzymes, all of which contribute to weight gain.

Reducing toxins in your environment goes a long way toward solving all three weight loss challenges: It helps dial back hormone chaos, moderate the side effects of addictive processed

foods, and thin lymph fluid to make movement more effective at ridding the body of waste.

"Daily exposure to environmental toxins can have a major impact on your health and can lead to becoming overweight," says Gottfried.

"Detoxification is so powerful: It can flip the switch toward healing, repair and fat loss. We detox to rid our bodies of the inevitable buildup of toxins that happen in modern life. It boosts metabolism, helps remove hormone-disrupting chemicals and rids the body of extra toxins in the bloodstream."

To detox your life, begin by taking a look at your health and beauty products. Consider replacing or eliminating personal care products that have hormone-disrupting parabens, phthalates or sodium lauryl sulfate. Take a look at your cleaners, as well. Most contain chemicals that have unknown effects on the body. Instead, use natural cleaners, such

as white vinegar. Also, switch to glass and stainless steel food containers and avoid storing or cooking food in plastic containers. (For more healthy ways to detox, turn to page 66.)

If you can, spend plenty of time outside or at least open the windows in your home for a few hours each day.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the air inside the home can be up to five times more polluted than the air outside.

Ridding your life of as many toxins as possible will go far.





Keeping your muscles strong boosts your daily metabolism.

FIX **PRIORITIZE PLANTS**

One easy recipe for success? Eat less meat overall and far fewer processed foods, and find your way to more plant-based fare, centered largely around whole foods like fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains. Trust us: After a while, it's all your body will want to dine on.

"You've probably been eating like the rest of us did for years, from all the foods available in the Standard American Diet. Human-made foods are heavily marketed and addicting, so it is normal to feel some loss is taking place," warns Fuhrman. "But once you realize that the plant food kingdom is vast and capable of supporting many amazing menus of great-tasting convenience foods, gourmet dishes and fantastic desserts, your sense of loss or being on a diet will disappear."

One simple daily food plan Gottfried recommends for people looking to reset their diet: Aim to eat 1 pound of vegetables; 75-100 grams of protein from cold-water fish, crustaceans, chicken and eggs; up to 50 grams of net carbs (carbohydrates minus fiber) from fiber-rich sweet potatoes, yams and cassava; and aim to drink at least a half-gallon of water or herbal tea. Additionally, eat avocados and olives for healthy fat,

and cook your veggies in coconut oil or ghee. (For more on the perks of a plant-based diet, turn to page 62.)

FIX **FIND YOUR FLOW**

Not only will regular movement get the lymph system moving again to eliminate bloat and buildup of excess toxins and fatty acids, but it can also help transform your fat cells, according to Gottfried.

"Exercise can help convert white fat, concentrated in your belly and subcutaneous tissue, into something close to the virtuous brown fat that burns calories," she explains. That includes weight training

three days a week. "Strength training increases muscle mass which keeps the metabolism revved up, which improves the body's ability to burn fat."

Adding in a mind-body movement like yoga is also key: "Yoga functions as a reset for the stress response system, which also happens to be the control system for hormones," Gottfried says. "Yoga has also been shown to lower cortisol and inflammation."

A daily yoga practice is proven to help dial back stress that causes hormone havoc. And in one study, practicing three times a week for one hour at a time helped women lose weight, especially dangerous deep belly fat, and generate higher levels of adiponectin, a fat-burning hormone.

Most studies show that significant improvement requires at least three months of regular yoga practice, 30 minutes per day, five days per week, although one study showed improved hormone levels after just one month. Gittleman recommends Yin Yoga (holding poses for longer periods), especially, for lymph movement.

Eating more plant-based foods will give you all-day energy.



Fat cells play an important role in the body.



Meet Your Fat Cells

You may think of “fat” as a bad word, but a certain amount of body fat is necessary to stay alive. Our brains and cell membranes are made of fat, after all. We thought it might be time to get to know a little more about the body’s most maligned cells.

Name Adipocyte

Age Older than you’d think. Fat cells are formed while we’re still in the womb, and we develop even more during puberty.

Body Type Tiny and cute. “Fat” is a big word, but fat cells are actually

super small—five fat cells (even full ones) would fit on the head of an average pin.

Job Providing insulation, storing energy, regulating appetite and energy, releasing hormones.

Hometown The body can stash fat in all sorts of places. Fat stored under the skin, called subcutaneous fat, is the jiggly stuff you can pinch on your belly, arms and thighs. The body can also store fat deep inside the body, which is called visceral fat. This is the fat that can wrap around your organs

and cause an array of problems, from diabetes to heart disease.

Future Goals After puberty, most of us have the same number of fat cells for the rest of our lives. As we gain weight, fat cells just get bigger—unless the body has to create new fat cells to store harmful toxins in an emergency. As we lose weight, the cells deflate like a balloon, ready to be refilled in the future.

Favorite Color Every body has white fat and brown fat. White fat is where the body stores energy for later use,

and it also helps in the creation of certain hormones, such as estrogen and leptin. Brown fat is loaded with little fat-burning factories—that’s what gives it its color. These cells actually burn up excess fatty acids to keep the body warm.

Hobbies Mixing it up. Beige fat is a fairly new discovery and still being studied, but scientists believe that it is white fat that is able to turn into brown fat when the body is under extreme stress, like if it’s very cold or goes through an extended time without food.

DOUBLE STANDARD

When it comes to weight loss, diet and exercise do seem to play favorites—mostly toward men. BY COLLEEN TRAVERS

It's an all-too-familiar scenario for many a woman. She's feeling motivated to lose a few extra pounds. She does all of the things she needs to best set herself up for success: meal prep, finding a fitness routine that fits her lifestyle and perhaps even telling her family and friends all about her goal to help keep herself accountable. This may convince some people to join her on her journey. Great! The more the merrier, right? Yes...just with one caveat. If you're a woman and your new weight loss group happens to also include your husband, boyfriend, or male co-worker or friend, you may notice you're not all exactly getting equal results in the same amount of time.

"If a man and a woman are doing the same exact diet or fitness routine, the man will naturally lose weight quicker, oftentimes without even trying very hard," says Dr. Laura Purdy, a board-certified family medicine physician based in Nashville, Tennessee. "This is due to a number of physiological

'IF A MAN AND WOMAN ARE DOING THE SAME EXACT [THING], THE MAN WILL NATURALLY LOSE WEIGHT QUICKER.'

—Laura Purdy, MD

factors that unfortunately for women leave them predisposed from birth to have a harder time with weight loss."

Frustrating? Definitely. However, by understanding why men can whittle down their waistlines faster, women can work smarter, not harder, when it comes to diet and exercise. It's this knowledge that can make all the difference in actually *seeing* a change when it comes to the time and effort you're investing in yourself. Read on for some of the reasons that men and women lose weight differently, plus a few areas in your life that may be causing weight gain without you realizing it.

MUSCLE MASS

It's no joke when you hear that men lose weight easier—at times it can feel like weight loss is just ingrained in their bones. And it kind of is, but in this case it's in their muscles. "Men are born with a higher percentage of lean muscle mass," says Purdy. "Lean muscle burns calories faster than other tissues such as fat." One study published in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* found that men on average have approximately 72 pounds of muscle mass while women have 46. Women also have a higher proportion of fat on their body (due to factors such as breasts, which are mostly fat) because that fat is needed to do things such as carry a baby, give birth and breastfeed. According to the American Council on Exercise, the average body fat percentage for men is 18% to 24%, while for women it's 25% to 31%, making this one math equation that's easy—albeit aggravating—to understand.

"More muscle mass means more calories are burning at rest, which results in a higher metabolism," says

Going on a weight loss journey with a friend or partner is never a bad idea—just be careful comparing results.



Min Krishnamurthy, a registered dietitian and nutrition coach at 3StepDiet based in San Diego. “This means that when a man and a woman are eating the exact same diet, they will have different outcomes based on their muscle mass discrepancies. Even men who are overweight tend to have more muscle mass than the average woman, which is why they may lose weight faster because they are still burning more calories at rest.”

When you’re going about your day, you burn calories doing anything from washing dishes to even sitting at your desk answering emails. This is known as your basal metabolic rate (BMR), or the amount of energy expended at rest. Your body burns between 60% and 75% of your daily calories in this phase (the remaining 25% to 40% comes from exercise and the thermic effect of food, or the energy it takes to chew and digest). “Approximately 20% of your daily calories is burned by muscle, and only 5% is burned by fat tissue,” explains Purdy. This means that muscle is burning four times as many calories as fat is—and since men have 57% more muscle mass, it makes it hard for women to keep up.

HORMONES

So men have more lean muscle mass versus fat, but why is it that women carry more fat to begin with? Blame it on your hormones, says Dr. Ana Kausel, a board-certified endocrinologist with Anzara Health based in Miami.

“The reason men burn more calories than women (and have more muscle mass) is because they have higher levels of testosterone,” says Kausel. “For women, the opposite is happening. Because women have higher amounts of estrogen, they tend to accumulate more subcutaneous fat compared to men. That’s how the female body is programmed for fertility.”

‘THE REASON MEN BURN MORE CALORIES THAN WOMEN IS BECAUSE THEY HAVE HIGHER LEVELS OF TESTOSTERONE.’

—Ana Kausel, MD

Estrogen is also responsible for how women carry their fat compared to men. “Some estrogen is produced in body fat and because of that, it affects fat distribution on the body,” explains Purdy. “Estrogen contributes to fat accumulating in the hips and lower half of the body, which is why many women may find they become pear-shaped when they start to gain weight.” When the ovaries stop producing estrogen during menopause, the metabolism will get more sluggish and that fat distribution will mimic a man’s, building up fat around the abdomen instead.

Because women have higher levels of estrogen, they also have to deal with hormone fluctuations, which may come with weight gain. For example, estrogen levels are typically the highest during the first half of the menstrual cycle, and Purdy says this may come with side effects such as water retention. “While testosterone may increase or decrease slightly over a 24-hour period, it doesn’t have this type of monthlong fluctuating cycle that impacts weight the way estrogen does in women,” she says.

An exception to the hormonal differences in men and women comes into play when there is a clinical diagnosis of obesity, notes Kausel. “When a man, for example, is obese, their hormones are completely unbalanced. Testosterone levels are lower and estrogen levels are higher because there is more fatty tissue, and this sets off a chain reaction.” Plus,

in healthy men, some testosterone naturally gets converted into estrogen. This creates a hormonal balance, protecting the bones and lowering the risk of developing diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular issues. When there isn’t enough testosterone for this conversion and estrogen is only created from fat, these protective benefits vanish—along with testosterone’s ability to help stoke that calorie burn.

DIGESTION

The way men and women digest food is also different, which also may affect their body weight. “This is an area that is continuously being researched but so far we know that men churn out more stomach acid than women and they also have shorter colons,” says Krishnamurthy. “These differences could explain the increased risk of acid reflux for men and constipation for women.” While weight loss is often touted as a remedy to acid reflux, those who have a gastrointestinal condition may simply find themselves taking in fewer calories, as it’s uncomfortable to eat and/or digest certain foods. And while constipation isn’t a direct link to weight gain, the fact that it takes food longer to travel through a woman’s colon may cause bloating (weight gain’s unwelcome stepsister) to occur more easily and more often.

“Women are also more likely to experience irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which scientists believe may be related to female hormones estrogen and progesterone,” adds Krishnamurthy. Those with IBS are more prone to weight gain, as they may have to eat easily digestible, high-calorie foods such as white bread and pasta to control their symptoms.

All that said, there is still hope for women. Check out the box at right for how you can get a leg up in your quest to shed pounds.



Men and women digest food differently—just one more reason to choose foods wisely.

Leveling the Playing Field

If you're a woman, your DNA didn't entirely do you dirty. It's true that you have a set of challenges to overcome that the average healthy male does not. But now that you know why you gain weight, there are a few things you can do to level the playing field.

Check Your Medications Family medicine physician Dr. Laura Purdy says she's worked with clients who have realized a medication they've

been taking for years has weight gain as a side effect without it being called out. If you notice that your weight gain and difficulty losing weight began when you started a new prescription, talk to your health care provider to see if there is an alternative medication with fewer side effects that may work for you.

Diet Is Everything Movement is important but endocrinologist Dr. Ana Kausel says most

weight loss is a direct link to what you're eating. You don't need a fad or crash diet to do it, either. Focus on whole grains, fruits, vegetables and staying hydrated with low-calorie sips such as water for long-lasting success.

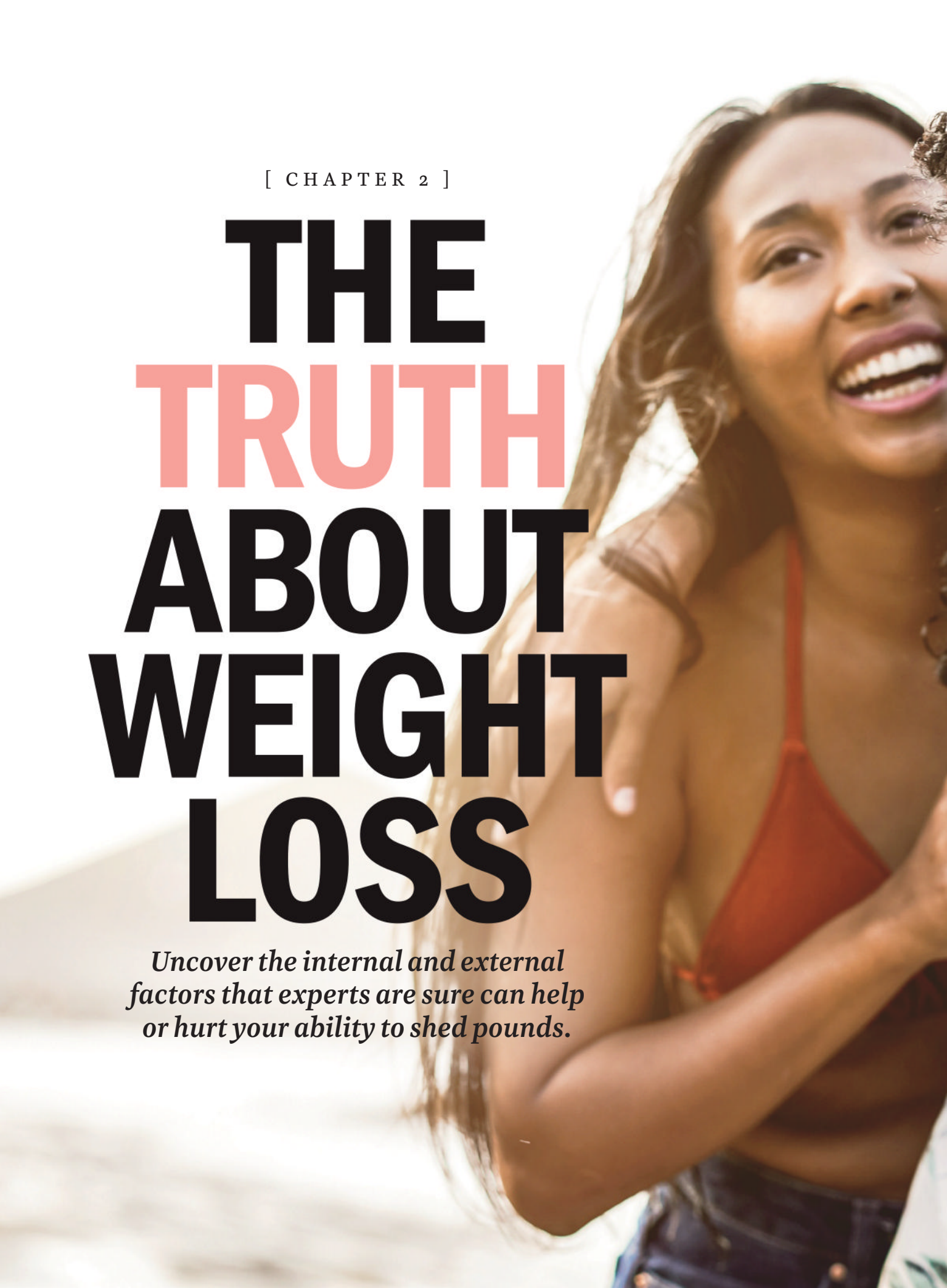
Pack on the Protein Registered dietitian Min Krishnamurthy says that women should be increasing their intake of lean protein (think chicken, beef, tofu, beans and

plain Greek yogurt) to get the scale trending downward. This should be coupled with weekly resistance training sessions, which will help build muscle, stoking calorie burn both during exercise and at rest. The recommended daily allowance calls for 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight for women. This typically nets out to 50 to 60 grams of protein. (Take your weight in pounds and multiply by 0.36 to find yours.)

[CHAPTER 2]

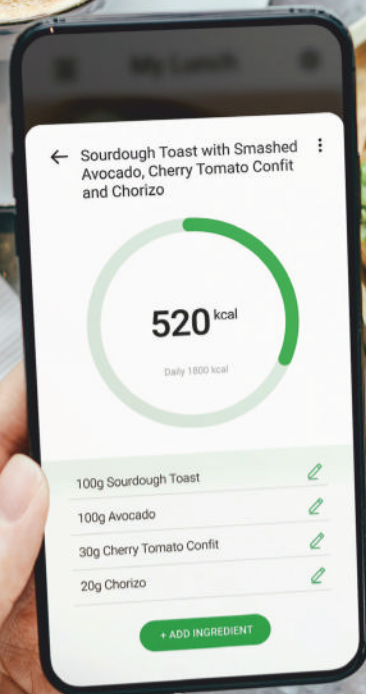
THE TRUTH ABOUT WEIGHT LOSS

Uncover the internal and external factors that experts are sure can help or hurt your ability to shed pounds.





While a lot of what works depends on the individual, there are a few things we're certain about.



WHY ALL CALORIES ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

Wait, has everything we've been taught about calories in and calories out been a big fat lie? Dietitians clear up the most common myths, and explain what really matters if you're trying to lose pounds.

BY KARLA WALSH



Going strictly by the numbers isn't going to give you the long-term results you're looking for.

If you've ever ordered an item off the 590-calorie-or-less "SkinnyLicious" menu at The Cheesecake Factory or watched an episode of *The Biggest Loser*, chances are you're familiar with the mantra "calories in, calories out." (As a refresher, a calorie is the amount of heat energy needed to raise the temperature of 1 gram of water by 1°C. It's also the term used to describe a unit of energy we score from the food and drink we consume.)

Since the 1950s, when medical researcher Max Wishnofsky measured

how much energy a pound of fat tissue represents and tabulated it to be 3,500 calories, we've been told that it takes 3,500 calories to create a pound of body weight. Based on the "average" body size, Americans are told to aim for about a 2,000-calorie-per-day diet, and if we want to see a lower number on the scale, the goal is to achieve a "calorie deficit."

"Consuming excessive quantities of calories will likely result in weight gain, but that's only one part of the puzzle. Sure, eating an appropriate amount of calories is helpful when you are on a weight loss journey, but data does suggest that it's not all about calories in and calories out," says Lauren Manaker, a registered dietitian and owner of Nutrition Now Counseling in Charleston, South Carolina. "Even though this calorie deficit concept has been followed for years, the obesity rates in the U.S. continue to rise."

Plus, all that number-crunching isn't sustainable over the long term—and it isn't the best for our mental or physical health. Read on for more about the calorie conundrum, plus how to lose weight without losing your sanity.

CALORIES IN VS. CALORIES OUT: YES OR BS?

Countless dietitians and hundreds of recent studies are calling the calories in vs. calories out concept into question. For one reason, it's because this theory assumes that a calorie from a fiber-rich raspberry is processed the same way by the body as a calorie from a sugar-rich candy bar.

"Calories from different sources of food with varying levels of macronutrients appear to have different effects on the body," Manaker says, referring to carbohydrates, fat and protein. "Protein has a higher thermic effect than other macronutrients, meaning it requires more energy to break it down."

This concept also doesn't take into account what happens as a body reacts to weight loss. Not only does a smaller body burn less energy—so a 5'2" woman will burn fewer calories per mile of running than a 6'3" man—but we also often experience hormonal and other metabolic shifts that slow the process. Besides making you feel hangry (oh yes, and handcuffed to your calorie-tracking app or notebook), tabulating and restricting calories has been scientifically proven to negatively impact gut health, increase risk for disordered eating behaviors, impact reproduction and several other important body processes, and trigger a cycle of yo-yo dieting, which has been linked to higher risk for heart disease later in life. What's more, in a study of competitors on *The Biggest Loser*, researchers found that six years after competing on the show, 14 participants' average metabolic rate was actually 427 calories slower than before they signed on to compete.

"Energy balance is the current consensus for how weight loss occurs, but the confusion comes from the idea that our bodies don't register calories this same way; there are factors that can influence one side of the energy balance equation and how much you eat in the first place," says Alex Caspero, a St. Louis-based registered dietitian and the owner of Delish Knowledge. Beyond that, "counting every single bite that you put in your mouth is a great way to zap the joy out of eating."

As a dietitian who has worked for a decade with patients who have eating disorders, Caspero says that super-vigilant calorie counting can lead to weight obsession and disordered eating habits. Since it's tough to assess portion size without weighing and measuring every bite, most people are also terrible at counting calories, too; it's nearly impossible to do so accurately. The plot thickens when you learn that food

Math on the Menu

“A supersized cookie and an avocado may have the same amount of calories, true, but they will be metabolized and used differently by the body,” confirms Roxana Ehsani, a registered dietitian nutritionist in Miami, of why calories are not all equal. Since the avocado is mostly made up of fat and fiber, it will be absorbed at a slower

rate than the refined carb-rich cookie. The same holds true with the calorie-equivalent duos below. There’s one clear nutrition winner in each, but if the calories in, calories out theory proved true, each pairing would be a fair trade. We’re not saying that eating over a dozen eggs at a time is a wise idea, but it shows the impact of a value meal.

THE BREAKDOWN



100 calories
25 strawberries
or 9 potato chips

275 calories
1 slice from
a 14-inch pizza
or 10½ cups
cherry tomatoes

325 calories
1 cup of
low-fat cottage
cheese topped
with 2 cups
of blueberries
or 1 deep-
fried chicken
thigh

400 calories
½ cup hummus
with 4 cups carrot
sticks or 2 toaster
pastries

1,025 calories
Big Mac with large
fries or 13 eggs

labels are allowed to be 20% “off” in either direction, according to Food and Drug Administration regulations. That 200-calorie serving of ice cream could have anywhere between 160 and 240 calories. When you’re convinced that every calorie counts, that’s actually not so helpful.

A lot of people think all they need to do is cut out 500 calories a day from their diet to lose 1 pound a week, since cutting 500 calories over the course of 7 days adds up to 3,500 calories, or 1 pound. “In reality, few people have a good gauge on how many calories their body actually needs,” explains Roxana Ehsani, a registered dietitian nutritionist in Miami and a national media spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. “Sometimes people have other underlying conditions, medical conditions, low or high blood markers, nutritional deficiencies or are on certain medications that can make losing weight difficult.”

Plus, many popular calorie-focused diet plans are all about “how low can you go”—often to the tune of 1,200 calories per day—which is not only difficult, but can be harmful. “Not consuming enough energy will make you feel lethargic, increase breakdown of protein (muscle) for energy and increase risk of micronutrient deficiency,” Caspero says. “While 1,200 calories is the typical level given in generic plans, that’s the amount my toddler needs every day—not me as an adult woman.”

The super-low-cal lifestyle can also lead to a slippery slope of disordered eating practices in an attempt to lose weight and meet a calorie deficit, Ehsani notes. Perhaps a person adds a second workout of the day to burn more calories so they can “allow” themselves to eat more later on.

Or maybe they purposely only choose nutrient-poor foods and drinks because

they're lower in calories, say, sugar-free drinks and candy or meal-replacement shakes made with ultraprocessed ingredients. These practices can drain a diet of important vitamins, minerals and macronutrients that help the body function optimally *and* increase the risk of eating disorders all at once.

STOP COUNTING, START LOSING

“For better or for worse, there isn’t one surefire way to result in weight loss for 100% of the population,” Manaker admits. “Unfortunately, weight loss isn’t as simple as eating fewer calories than what you’re burning. I think we’re finally accepting that weight loss isn’t a result of a simple math equation.”

So if energy balance does play a role in weight loss, but calorie counting isn’t the way, what’s the solution for a person hoping for scale success?

‘I THINK WE’RE FINALLY ACCEPTING THAT WEIGHT LOSS ISN’T THE RESULT OF A SIMPLE MATH EQUATION.’

—Lauren Manaker, RD

Instead of aiming to restrict calories, a more abundant, long-term strategy is to think about what you should be *adding* to your diet—not what you need to restrict, says registered dietitian nutritionist Lauren Harris-Pincus, founder of NutritionStarringYOU.com and author of *The Everything Easy Pre-Diabetes Cookbook*.

“The most important goal for overall metabolic health is to meet our nutritional needs through a wide variety of foods including fruits, veggies, nuts, beans, seeds, whole grains, lean proteins and low-fat dairy or dairy alternatives,” she says.



It’s important to choose foods you enjoy eating versus counting calories.

Delete the calorie-counting app or recycle that notebook, and consider these additive strategies instead, the dietitians suggest.

Plate Wisely At lunch and dinner, and breakfast, when possible, “cover half of your plate with nonstarchy veggies, one-quarter with a whole grain or beans and the final one-quarter with a lean protein source. Finish with a piece of fruit and add in some dairy or a dairy alternative fortified with calcium and vitamin D,” Harris-Pincus says. “By filling up on these nutrient-dense, fiber-rich foods, you will have less room for ultra-processed foods and added sugars.”

Set Reasonable Expectations

Some diet plans tout that they can help you “lose 20 pounds in 1 month!” But most of the initial weight loss on severely restrictive programs is water weight; and is likely to come back (plus an additional pound...or four). “Try to keep expectations around weight loss realistic,” Caspero says. “Losing 10 pounds fast is extreme and not sustainable; run away from any program that makes claims like this.” A healthy pace of weight loss depends on body size and composition, but 1 pound per week or so is a sensible goal for most.

Call in Reinforcements Just as it’s vital to get regular physicals with your primary care doctor and yearly skin

exams with your dermatologist, it can be beneficial to meet with a registered dietitian nutritionist. “An RDN does more than just help you lose weight,” Ehsani says. “They can also help you accurately determine your basal metabolic rate, estimate your calorie needs based on your activity level and help you come up with a personalized eating plan that takes into account your goal of weight loss, your personal taste preferences, budget and schedule as well.” You can find a dietitian near you by visiting eatright.org.

Consider Other Lifestyle Factors

Beyond what you eat, there are many lifestyle habits that play into the weight loss equation. Try to incorporate stress management strategies, aim for seven to nine hours of sleep and shoot for 30 minutes of moderate physical activity at least five days per week, Manaker recommends. (For more on stress, exercise and sleep, turn to pages 44, 78 and 84, respectively.) “Many of us are looking for a magic bullet when it comes to weight loss, but the truth is rather boring. A focus on more fiber-rich, protein-rich foods can help you feel full on less, which can be really helpful in weight loss attempts without making you feel like you’re starving,” Caspero says. And without making you feel like you’re handcuffed to the calorie calculator.

THE PERILS OF PROCESSED FOODS

The damage that ultraprocessed and packaged fare can do to your waistline and your overall health is clearer than ever before. BY MANDY OAKLANDER

Ultraprocessed foods—the kinds made irresistible by sugar, fat and salt—are ubiquitous in the U.S., making up as much as 60% of the average American diet. But a small, intensive study published in the journal *Cell Metabolism* shows that their low price and convenience comes at a cost to health.

When people ate a highly processed diet for two weeks, they consumed far more calories and gained more weight and body fat than they did when they ate a less processed diet—even though both diets had the same amounts of nutrients such as sugar, fat and sodium.

It wasn't a shock to find that ultraprocessed foods weren't healthy—other research has linked them to a higher risk of cancer and obesity. What was unexpected was that sugar, fat and salt didn't seem to be what was driving people to overeat. "I was surprised by the results," says Dr. Kevin Hall, lead author of the study and senior investigator at the National Institute of Diabetes and

'THERE IS A CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMETHING ABOUT ULTRAPROCESSED FOODS THAT CAUSES PEOPLE TO OVERTREAT AND GAIN WEIGHT.'

—Kevin Hall, PhD

Digestive and Kidney Diseases at the National Institutes of Health. "It's the first trial that can actually demonstrate that there is a causal relationship between something about ultraprocessed foods—independent of those nutrients—that causes people to overeat and gain weight."

A UNIQUE EXPERIMENT

In the study, 20 healthy adults lived for a month in a lab, where all of their meals and snacks were prepared for them. The two meal plans were either highly processed or unprocessed, and

everyone ate one—then switched to the other—for two weeks at a time. (Foods such as canned ravioli, chicken nuggets and bagels made up the ultraprocessed diet; the unprocessed diet had salads, eggs, oatmeal and nuts.)

Both diets contained nearly identical nutrient profiles, with the same amount of sugar, fat, sodium, fiber and more. But the meals had very different effects. When people ate a highly processed diet, they ate about 500 more calories per day than they did on the less processed diet. They also gained about 2 pounds over the course of two weeks on the ultraprocessed diet—and lost about the same amount on the unprocessed diet.

They ate faster, too, which could be one reason why they gained more weight. "Ultraprocessed food tends to be softer, which makes it easier to chew and swallow," Hall says. "One of the theories is that if you're eating more quickly, you're not giving your gut enough time to signal to your brain that you've had enough calories and that you're full and to stop eating. By



Processed foods are cheaper and easier to prepare than unprocessed ones, which is why American families rely on them so heavily. But the research suggests that this convenience factor is simply not worth the risk to your health.

the time the brain gets that signal, it's too late—you've already overeaten.”

People's hormones also changed depending on how processed their meals were. Even though participants said they felt equally full and satisfied on both diets, the unprocessed diet led to an increase in an appetite-suppressing hormone called PYY and a decrease in the hunger hormone ghrelin. “Both of these hormonal changes that took place, for reasons we don't fully understand, tend to support our observation,” Hall says.

These damaging effects of processed foods have been demonstrated on a larger scale as well. In a 2021 study by scientists from the International Agency for Research on Cancer,

a division of the World Health Organization, researchers looked at the diets of nearly 350,000 people across nine European countries over five years. They found that compared to people who ate the least ultraprocessed foods (which are defined as products that are made mostly or entirely of foods not used in home cooking), people with the highest consumption who started at a normal weight had a 15% greater risk of becoming overweight or obese, and those who started overweight had a 16% greater risk of becoming obese. And a 2022 study of over 70,000 people found that a 10% increase in consumption of processed foods corresponded to a 25% higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes, a condition

that is up to seven times more prevalent in people who are obese than in those at a healthy weight.

On an unprocessed diet, adds Hall, “people spontaneously reduce their calorie intake, leading to weight loss and body fat loss, without them having to count calories or even intentionally do so.” (For more information on the fresh, whole foods that have these benefits, turn to page 68.)

Avoiding ultraprocessed food isn't easy, especially financially. In the *Cell Metabolism* study, the ingredients for the unprocessed meals cost about 40% more than for the ultraprocessed foods, Hall says. But proof continues to roll in that cutting down on processed foods may be worth the extra price and effort.

STRATEGICALLY SELECTING SWEETS

Follow these smart schemes for indulging in a healthy way and you'll continue to drop pounds while satisfying your biggest cravings.

BY JAMIE DUCHARME, WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ALYSSA SYBERTZ

The case against dessert seems open and shut. The sugar that makes treats so sweet has been linked to weight gain and chronic diseases ranging from type 2 diabetes to cancer; many desserts also have an abundance of saturated fats, which potentially harm the heart, and plenty of empty calories.

But some studies are suggesting that having dessert every once in a while—the real, indulgent kind, not the cut up fresh fruit kind—may actually be a useful tool for eating more healthfully, when it's used strategically. “All foods can fit into a healthy diet when they're balanced with other choices,” says Sara Riehm, a registered dietitian at the Orlando Health Center for Healthy Improvement.

One such helpful strategy: picking out your dessert first—instead of after a meal, like most of us do—which has been linked to eating less overall. In a recent study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, people consistently chose healthier meals and consumed fewer calories when they picked a decadent dessert at the beginning of their meal. They didn't even have to eat the treat first; just knowing they had selected it was enough to trigger a change.

“If we choose something healthy first, then this gives us a license to choose something bigger later,” says Martin Reimann, an assistant professor of marketing and cognitive science at the University of Arizona

and co-author of the study. “If you turn it around and choose something heavier early on, then this license is already expired.” Making a calorie-heavy choice first seems to unconsciously steer people to “put the foot on the brake a little” as they decide what else to eat.

LOOKING BEYOND SUPPER

Reimann and his team studied 134 university faculty, staff and graduate students who were eating lunch in the school's cafeteria. On four different days, they offered four different dessert options in the food line: a healthy choice (fresh fruit) placed before the main and side dish options, an indulgent choice (lemon cheesecake) before the savory



*These intelligent ideas
will help you find the space
in your healthy diet for your
favorite sweet treats.*



Eating your sweets in the morning can keep them from being the thing that tips the balance of your healthy day.

calories as people who chose a healthy dessert (fruit salad) first, but the difference was much less pronounced when they decided on dessert at the end of the order. Nearly 56% of those who started with chocolate cake went on to choose the lighter main dish (grilled lemon chicken over chicken cordon bleu), versus about 44% of the fruit orderers.

INTELLIGENT INDULGENCES

While the above study suggests that the timing of your dessert selection can have an impact, both physiologically and psychologically, the point during the day at which you eat it can, as well. Some experts recommend having your sweet after a workout, since the body needs sugar to recover from intense activity and can thus put treats to better use. Foods that combine simple sugars and protein, such as peanut butter cups, aid in recovery while also satisfying your sweet tooth.

A strategically consumed sweet can even change your overall eating habits, research suggests. One 2012 paper found that people with obesity who followed a diet plan that included desserts such as chocolate, cookies or doughnuts consumed with breakfast later experienced fewer junk food cravings than people who ate a low-calorie, low-carbohydrate morning meal. The study authors suggest that this type of well-timed dessert may help with weight loss and management over time.

Moderate indulging may also help people avoid sugar binges. Research has shown that deprivation can spark cravings, potentially causing people to eventually eat more of the foods they were trying to avoid. So if you're trying to reduce your sugar intake, a small helping of dessert may actually help you stick to that goal—at least at first. “Try consuming favorite desserts in smaller portions or less frequently,”

dishes, fruit placed after the main meal or cheesecake after the main meal.

Almost 70% of people who took the cheesecake first went on to choose a healthier main and side dish (chicken fajitas and a side salad, instead of fried fish and french fries), but only about a third of the people who took fruit did so. All told, people who picked cheesecake first went on to eat about 250 fewer calories throughout the course of the meal, compared to people who selected fruit as dessert first. People who took cheesecake after choosing the rest of their meal ended up eating about 150 more calories than those who picked it first.

The phenomenon wasn't just true on campus. It also held when 160 adults were asked to put together

‘TRY CONSUMING FAVORITE DESSERTS IN SMALLER PORTIONS OR LESS FREQUENTLY, IN ORDER TO RETRAIN YOUR BRAIN AND TASTE BUDS TO CRAVE THEM LESS.’

—Sara Riehm, RD

a hypothetical dinner order online and estimate how much of it they would finish.

People who picked an indulgent dessert (chocolate cake) before ordering the rest of their food said they expected to eat about half as many

suggest Riehm. Over time, reducing your consumption little by little can retrain your brain and taste buds to crave sugary foods less.

BUILDING YOUR BEST DESSERT

All that said, there are foods you can choose to build your dessert around that can help facilitate your weight loss goals. “For someone who has a strong sweet tooth and wants to consume larger portions, fresh fruit can be a satisfying, nutritious treat,” says Riehm. “Fruit is rich in fiber and micronutrients such as vitamins and minerals.” Dress up your fruit salad with slivered almonds, unsweetened coconut flakes or nut butter, which are loaded with healthy fats, to make it feel more like an indulgent dessert and less like the “healthy option.”

When in doubt, dark chocolate is always a smart choice. Dark chocolate contains weight loss-promoting fiber and immune-boosting antioxidants, plus it’s been shown to lower blood pressure and improve cardiovascular health. The darker the chocolate the better, since that means it will contain more of these healthy nutrients. Enjoy a square or two on its own, sprinkle chocolate shavings or chocolate chips onto fruit, or melt it and drizzle it over fruit or plain, freshly popped popcorn.

“You can also adjust your recipes to make them a little healthier,” suggests Riehm. Try making homemade chocolate mousse using avocado; fudge using nut butter; “ice cream” with frozen bananas; brownies with black beans; and cookies with dates, tahini or oats. Fruit can also be cooked and prepared in creative ways, such as roasting or grilling for additional flavor without any added sugar.

The bottom line: When you do decide to treat yourself, a growing body of research suggests that doing so strategically can pay off.



5 Alternative Sweeteners

IF YOU’RE NOT READY TO GIVE UP THE SWEET STUFF IN YOUR COFFEE OR YOUR FAVORITE BAKED DESSERT, TRY ONE OF THESE IN PLACE OF REGULAR SUGAR.

Raw Honey

When used in moderation, honey is an A+ sweetener and a superfood in its own right. It’s loaded with enzymes, antioxidants and other nutrients that are good for the gut and can help to strengthen the immune system. Look for local honey when possible. Honey is great for stirring into coffee or tea, drizzling on yogurt or cereal or using in salad dressings or dips.

Stevia

Stevia, which comes in liquid or granulated form, is derived from the stevia plant and is more than 200 times sweeter than sugar. Unlike some of the other natural sweeteners here, stevia has zero calories and zero carbs so it won’t affect your blood sugar levels—which also means it’s allowed on a keto diet. Since stevia comes in different forms, you can use it however you like; just be careful when subbing it for sugar in recipes because it won’t be a 1-to-1 swap.



Coconut Sugar

Something you can swap evenly with table sugar is

coconut sugar, a naturally derived sweetener that comes from coconut sap. Like honey, it has a less dramatic impact on blood sugar levels than regular sugar while also delivering a variety of beneficial phytonutrients.

Maple Syrup

If you like the distinct flavor of maple, pure maple syrup is a smart sweetener choice thanks to its immune-boosting antioxidants. Drizzle it over yogurt, granola or oat pancakes, stir into coffee or tea, or make maple-flavored baked treats.

Erythritol

Erythritol is a sugar alcohol, so like stevia it has no calories and no carbs and is commonly found in sugar-free products. Unlike other sweeteners, erythritol has been found to help prevent tooth decay. You can get it granulated or powdered; the latter is an easy swap for powdered sugar and the former can be used the same way as sugar.

WHY AM I ALWAYS HUNGRY?

Your urge to snack extends beyond your physical needs for food. Here, where it comes from and how to combat it. BY MARKHAM HEID

Too little sleep and too much stress can make you hungry. Watching TV can make you hungry. Your hormones and mood and even the wrong-sized fork can make you hungry.

“Hunger is not as simple as needing food to meet physical needs,” says behavioral economics expert Dr. Aner Tal, the founder and director of the Behavioral Lab at the College of Law and Business in Tel Aviv. “There are many different psychological and biological and environmental factors that affect hunger.”

Not least of which are your eating habits, Tal says. “If you’re used to eating lunch every day at 2 o’clock, you’ll feel the need to eat at 2 o’clock, even if you don’t have a biological requirement for food at that time,” he explains. Eat all the time, and your

body will slowly learn to expect food—and crave it—all day, every day.

But what causes you to eat all the time in the first place? Your food choices play a big part in that, says Dr. Belinda Lennerz, an endocrinologist and researcher at Boston Children’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School.

“The fundamental role of hunger is to drive us to seek and consume food in order to keep the amount of available energy in our blood stable,” says Lennerz, who has conducted research into the dietary drivers of hunger and cravings. “This occurs more effectively when we consume a meal higher in fat, protein and fiber, which are digested slowly.”

While these foods help our bodies achieve and maintain a satisfyingly balanced state for hours between meals, other foods trigger metabolic

shifts that send us back to the kitchen or snack room much sooner after we’ve eaten, Lennerz says. You can probably guess what foods she’s talking about: highly processed carbs and sugar.

Dr. David Ludwig—Lennerz’s colleague and co-researcher at Harvard and Boston Children’s and author of *Always Hungry? Beat Cravings and Lose Weight the Healthy Way!*—calls out many of the most popular processed carbs by name: white bread, white rice, sugar-sweetened beverages, prepared breakfast cereals, cookies and chips. “These foods confuse your body’s natural hunger-control systems, which usually work really well when you’re eating slowly digesting foods,” he says.

Unlike healthy fat- and fiber-rich foods—the Greek yogurts and leafy green vegetables and legumes that calmly stroll through your digestive



‘[HIGHLY PROCESSED CARBS] CONFUSE YOUR BODY’S NATURAL HUNGER-CONTROL SYSTEMS, WHICH USUALLY WORK REALLY WELL WHEN YOU’RE EATING SLOWLY DIGESTING FOODS.’

—David Ludwig, MD, PhD

system—processed carbs move through your gut like it’s a Slip ’N Slide.

These snack foods, sweets, sugary drinks and other processed goodies make up 61% of the average American’s diet. Your body’s reaction to these quick-digesting foods is to release large amounts of insulin into the bloodstream to normalize your surging blood sugar levels, Lennerz explains.

Like a cattle rancher, insulin herds sugar and the other calories from your meal into storage, which usually means your fat cells, Ludwig says. This not only promotes weight gain, but it also tricks your body into believing you require more energy to satisfy your body’s needs, which in turn causes your hunger to rebound rapidly. If you also happen to be on a low-fat diet high in processed foods, all of this is intensified, Ludwig adds.

It’s not easy to avoid, of course. “In today’s food environment, food is readily available without a delay at any given time,” Lennerz says. She adds that merely smelling or seeing food can fire up your brain and body’s “feed me” processes. That means watching TV shows about cooking, seeing snacks on your kitchen counter or walking by a break room where cookies or chips are on offer can all stoke hunger pangs that would have remained dormant if you hadn’t been exposed to those temptations.

Add to this the growing body of research that shows many of these highly processed foods—particularly sugar—can fire up our brains’ reward systems in ways similar to cigarettes, drugs and other addictive substances, and it’s no wonder many of us spend our days with a case of the munchies.

(For more on the perils of processed foods, turn to page 36.)

So what can you do about it? For starters, ditch those highly processed foods in favor of the healthy, fatty, fiber- and protein-rich foods that Lennerz and Ludwig mentioned earlier. Research suggests mindfulness meditation, a brisk walk, exercise and keeping food out of sight can also help knock down your incessant cravings.

STRESS AS SABOTEUR

Chronic tension can set up a vicious cycle of increased junk food cravings, excess fat storage and weight gain. Learn how to break free of the trap.

BY JENNIFER JOSEPH AND JAMIE DUCHARME

In today's go-go-go society, stress is an unavoidable fact of life. Most of us feel the effects viscerally on a daily basis: Your heartbeat quickens in response to an alarming news story, your palms get sweaty ahead of an important meeting, or you feel an energizing rush of adrenaline as you race to meet a deadline.

These physical symptoms are the result of the body's hardwired fight-or-flight response. "The stress hormone cortisol is released in response to a stressful situation and sets the body up to run, or stay and fight," says physician and researcher Dr. Sara Gottfried, director of precision medicine at the Marcus Institute of Integrative Health and author of *Women, Food, and Hormones*. "In the past, this protective response kept us alive in life-threatening situations when faced with predators. The burst of cortisol from our adrenal glands causes a rush of glucose into our muscles so we would have the energy to fight or run. It also raises our blood pressure to give a burst of oxygen to the brain so we are able to think more clearly when faced with danger."

In the short term, these physiological responses can be helpful for increasing energy and alertness during a stressful event. "However, our body's ancient wiring has not caught up to the modern age. It can't distinguish between a threat to life from a demanding email from a boss or the buildup of traffic making you late," notes Gottfried. "It responds to all of the daily annoyances that we perceive as stressful in the same way that it has responded for thousands of years. Yet, these days we aren't in physical danger and we aren't running anywhere. In fact, we are sitting at our desks or in front of screens. As a result, the adrenals keep churning out more and more cortisol because they never get a clear signal that we are safe and secure and that the danger has passed."

Over time, chronically elevated cortisol levels can take a toll on health and set the body up for weight gain. "Chronic stress causes physiological damage to our body in the long term," says Gottfried. "With overexposure to toxic stress, cortisol floods our

bloodstream and our stress regulation system begins to malfunction." This malfunction can trigger hormonal imbalances that prime the body to pack on fat.

WHY DAILY ANXIETY SABOTAGES WEIGHT

Researchers have long known that chronic stress is correlated with weight gain. A 2017 study in the journal *Obesity* found that elevated levels of cortisol were associated with a larger waist circumference and higher body mass index (BMI). This phenomenon was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study in the journal *Diabetes & Metabolic Syndrome* looked at weight gain in 3,473 American adults during the pandemic and found that those who reported higher levels of anxiety were significantly more likely to have gained weight.

Just how does stress promote weight gain? "If we feel stressed all the time, cortisol levels remain elevated, which in turn means our blood sugar

*Mindlessly eating
comforting foods
when you're stressed
can inadvertently
strengthen
your cravings.*



is elevated. And insulin is released in response to high blood sugar,” says Gottfried. “This means that the glucose released by our body to prep the muscles to run instead gets stored as fat by insulin.” Complicating matters: If blood sugar and insulin levels remain high, cells eventually become less responsive to insulin,

also disrupts sleep—and a recent meta-analysis in the journal *Nutrients* found that insomnia and sleep deprivation are directly linked to weight gain. That’s because sleep loss leads to impaired executive and cognitive function, increased hunger and higher than normal calorie intake, as well as a decrease

times? Experts say there are a few different factors at play.

For one, chronically high cortisol levels can lead to increased appetite. But just as often, food itself is often used as a “numbing strategy,” says Amanda Baten, a nutritional psychologist. “It’s a distraction strategy in the same way that people might use alcohol or drugs or sex or TV as ways to create a buffer between themselves and whatever difficult feelings they are experiencing.”

Eating can even spark some of the same neurological reactions that drugs do, albeit to a lesser extent. Brain imaging research has shown that when people binge on carbohydrates and sugars, “it can actually activate the pleasure centers of the brain,” Baten says. Research has shown that sugar, like heroin or cocaine, can cause the feel-good chemical dopamine to flood the nucleus accumbens, the part of the brain responsible for pleasure and reward. Sugar can also release endogenous opioids, the body’s natural painkillers, which creates a pleasant effect.

But just like drugs and alcohol, emotional eating is a bandage for stress, rather than a cure. The feel-good effects from the sugar and carbs fade fast, and often leave you feeling worse than you did before you indulged. Many people report experiencing feelings of shame and anxiety after bingeing, which can spur the desire to reach for more food and set up a cycle of more disordered eating. Research suggests that people who regularly engage in emotional eating are also at an increased risk for depression and more likely to gain weight over time.

Instead of reaching for food as a coping mechanism, a healthier response is to first recognize that stress and negative emotions happen, and that we have to find sustainable ways to cope

‘THERE’S NO DOUBT ABOUT IT. STRESS IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST CULPRITS WHEN IT COMES TO CRAVING CARBS.’

—Sara Gottfried, MD

making it harder to keep blood sugar in balance and increasing the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. “Persistent stress can lead to insulin resistance, which makes it very difficult to lose weight,” Gottfried adds.

Elevated cortisol levels also alter how efficiently the body burns calories, notes Gottfried. “Dysregulated cortisol levels affect the production of thyroid hormones, which regulate how quickly we burn calories and maintain our metabolism.” Case in point: In a double-blind, randomized-controlled trial, researchers at Ohio State University interviewed women about their stress levels and measured their metabolic rate, blood sugar, cholesterol, insulin and cortisol before and after a meal. The scientists found that women who had experienced one or more stressful events in the prior 24 hours burned an average of 104 fewer calories (and had higher insulin levels) than those who weren’t stressed.

Additional research has shown that cortisol can specifically promote the accumulation of visceral fat (a harmful type of abdominal fat that develops around the organs and causes inflammation). Chronic stress

in physical activity. (To learn how adequate sleep can help you lose weight, turn to page 84.)

It’s not just lack of sleep that amps up appetite under stress. Cortisol increases the output of the hunger hormones ghrelin, neuropeptide Y and leptin—and it specifically drives up cravings for hyperpalatable foods. “Cortisol is a bully and if it is high, it impacts all the hormones in our bodies,” says Gottfried. “As you rush from task to task, your cortisol levels climb even higher, causing cravings for sugar. There’s no doubt about it. Stress is one of the biggest culprits when it comes to craving carbs.”

THE LINK BETWEEN TRYING TIMES AND APPETITE

While stress is bad for the body and the waistline, the ways people deal with it can be just as unhealthy. The American Psychological Association found in a recent survey that almost 40% of adults reported overeating or consuming junk food in response to stress during the prior month. And of those people, about half said they did so weekly. But what is it about food—particularly junk food—that calls to so many of us during stressful



Once you've learned to differentiate between emotional and physical hunger, utilizing stress reduction strategies such as yoga when you are experiencing the former can actually sate your "cravings."

with them, Baten says. "We are raised in a culture that tells us we should not have negative feelings—we shouldn't be sad, we shouldn't be angry," she notes. "There's a distinction to be made between what's an appropriate and healthy negative emotion that actually guides us to problem-solve by tolerating that feeling, versus what becomes the unhealthy negative emotional reaction or feeling."

SIGNS YOU ARE EATING MINDLESSLY—AND HOW TO STOP

While some people consciously dive into a pint of ice cream after a trying day, others may stress eat without even knowing it, says registered dietitian Allison Knott. "People get on autopilot," she says. "It becomes part of our lives, and we don't necessarily recognize what is happening."

To avoid mindless eating, it's important to understand the difference between emotional and physical hunger. Before you tear open a bag of chips, take stock of how you're

feeling physically and mentally, Knott says. Hunger feels different for everybody, but it's often accompanied by physical symptoms such as a growling or empty stomach, low energy and headache. If you're craving snacks without any of these physical signs, you may simply be looking for comfort or a distraction, Knott says. "If you aren't truly hungry and it is a comfort food type of response, or a way to manage the stress that is related to using food to soothe, then you might want to take a different approach."

When you're in the throes of a stressful situation, just about any healthy distraction—such as going for a walk, getting fresh air, doing a quick guided meditation or calling a friend—can help you avoid the draw of junk food, Baten says. Drinking water may also help, since people often confuse hunger and thirst.

But in the long term, getting at the root cause of your stress is more important than stopping yourself from snacking in the moment. Consistent healthy habits such as exercise, sleep

and proper nutrition are all sustainable stress relievers, Baten shares. And if you consistently struggle with emotional or stress eating, it may be worth speaking with a professional who can help you sort out underlying issues. "It's important to pay attention to our feelings before they become so intensified that we can't think clearly," Baten notes. "Emotional eating is happening because there's an emotional need that isn't being fulfilled."

But it's also important to acknowledge that your emotions will win out from time to time—and beating yourself up for occasionally choosing comfort food will only add to your stress. "We, unfortunately, put a lot of emphasis on our individual food choices, and there can be guilt connected to some of those more indulgent choices, which can ultimately lead to more stress," Knott says. "It really is about your pattern of eating and having a healthful diet in a sustainable, long period of time. That can include these indulgences in this overarching diet pattern."

A woman with dark curly hair, wearing a dark blue tank top, is shown from the side, flexing her right bicep. The background is a clear, bright blue sky. The text 'DIET FAQs' is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

DIET FAQS

*Your burning questions about
slimming down, answered.* BY KELLY BRYANT



Losing weight is a personal journey, but there are many common queries among those interested in shedding pounds. We asked a few registered dietitians for their insight on some of the most frequently asked questions regarding weight loss, based on the latest research and their experience helping clients reach their goals.

Q Can I target certain areas on my body when trying to lose weight?

A Regardless of what those ads for detox teas targeting belly fat want you to think, the answer here is no. It's your body that decides the best

place to store fat, just as it decides the best place to take it from. "Nothing is going to sway your genetic makeup and change where you store or lose excess energy," says Laura McDermott, a registered dietitian nutritionist at RET Physical Therapy Group in Seattle, Washington. "I say excess energy because that's what fat is and why it is stored. It's the excess energy that we're taking in but not able to use at that moment. So it's saved for later."

McDermott suggests the falsehood that it's possible to target specific areas for weight loss might stem from people gaining muscle in these spots through exercise. While this may change the

appearance of a particular area, it doesn't change its composition. When you're losing weight, you're removing fat throughout your entire body—not a targeted spot of your choosing.

Q Should I be eating lots of smaller meals or fewer big meals?

A There is no one-size-fits-all approach to weight loss. Each individual's journey will depend heavily on their schedule and lifestyle. For example, if your job only allows breaks at certain times of the day, eating fewer, larger meals may be what works best for you. On the other hand, if your routine presents shorter periods to eat throughout the day, perhaps grazing is the right idea.

With that said, a study in the *International Journal of Obesity* found that eating more than three times a day may contribute to overeating and, in turn, weight gain. "I see this in real life, too," says registered dietitian Samantha Cassetty, co-author of *Sugar Shock*. "Essentially, the more opportunities you have to eat, the more food cues you see, which can trigger overeating."

In her experience, when people graze throughout the day, eating for the sake of eating or out of boredom, they never experience hunger or proper fullness. And staying in tune with your hunger and fullness cues is one of the most helpful things you can do to lose weight. "When you finish a meal, you should feel content and reenergized," Cassetty says. "You may still have room to eat more but doing so would make you feel a little too full. Check in with yourself before, during and after your meal. This can help guide your decisions at that meal and on future eating occasions."

But what if you have trouble deciding when you are actually hungry and not just reaching for a snack because you're bored? Just listen to

your body, says Cassetty. Hunger cues include stomach growling, the feeling of an empty stomach, lack of energy and difficulty focusing. (For more on hunger, turn to page 42.)

Q How often do I have to weigh myself?

A How frequently you need to step on the scale is a hotly debated topic throughout the weight loss community. If the scale dictates your mood, lowers your self-esteem or causes emotional distress, Cassetty suggests skipping it. On the other hand, daily weigh-ins—which one study found to be linked with more weight loss than weekly weigh-ins—can be beneficial if the data itself isn't triggering.

"By weighing yourself, you're getting information that can keep you accountable to your goals," Cassetty says. "The scale is a form of self-monitoring. Other tracking behaviors, including activity and food tracking, are also linked to more significant weight loss."

McDermott acknowledges that this is a question with more than one correct answer, because

'I FIND THAT WHEN PEOPLE GIVE THEMSELVES A 7 P.M. SHUTOFF FOR EATING EACH NIGHT, IT PREVENTS THEM FROM MINDLESSLY SNACKING WHEN THEY ARE BORED.'

—Laura McDermott, RDN

each individual is different. She typically advises her clients to weigh themselves once a week. "I say this because there are so many things that you should be paying attention to in terms of success along your personal journey," McDermott says. "The scale number is only one of those. We want to make sure we're measuring non-scale victories, whether that is how often you're able to go for a walk or that you hit your water intake goal every day."

Q When I hit a plateau, do I have to change up my weight loss plan?

A When weight loss stalls, McDermott recommends getting back to basics. This includes making sure you are eating an adequate amount of veggies and fruit, moving your body and hydrating properly.

Due to the unpredictability involved with weight loss, Cassetty encourages clients to focus on healthy behaviors that seem sustainable and make them feel good overall rather than focusing on a goal weight. "You can't really control the number on the scale, but you can control how you eat, move and care for yourself," she says.

Q Does it matter what time you eat?

A Potentially. In a 2014 study, a set of female participants were given the exact same lunch but they were divided into two groups. One group ate lunch at 1 p.m. The other had to eat lunch at 4:30 p.m. Results showed that during the later seating of the exact same meal, there was a decreased thermic effect of the food. In other words, the participants didn't burn as many calories post-meal as the women who ate lunch earlier.

"Meal timing is an underrated strategy for weight loss," Cassetty says, pointing to the aforementioned study. "We know that disrupting your

circadian rhythm is associated with a higher risk of type 2 diabetes. It's also been shown to raise the risk of being overweight and obese by 23%. Our bodies are optimized to eat earlier in the day compared to later at night."

McDermott doesn't recommend eating dinner and going straight to bed either, because you want to be able to use that energy you're consuming. "I find that when people give themselves this 7 p.m. shutoff for eating each night, it's because it prevents them from mindlessly snacking when they are bored," she says. "When your goal is weight loss, imposing these time limits is an easy way to cut calories in general."

Q Is protein consumption really that important for weight loss?

A A healthy diet is one that provides you with all of the vitamins and nutrients you need for healthy body and brain function. There are 13 essential vitamins (including A, C, D, E, K and the B varieties) that all play different roles in making sure you run like a well-oiled machine. This is why it is so important to eat balanced meals in which you achieve adequate portions of protein, fruits, veggies, grains and dairy (if tolerated).

Protein does, however, have a big job on its hands when you are trying to lose weight. Some experts suggest individuals eat between 20 and 30 grams of protein at each meal. Research has shown that including protein in each meal significantly reduced BMI (body mass index) and belly fat compared to people who only consumed protein at dinner. "Protein is more filling than either fat or carbs, so eating it with meals helps you feel satisfied and delays the return of hunger," explains Cassetty. "Also, protein is needed to maintain your muscle mass, and muscle is your body's most energy-demanding tissue.



Drinking enough water can curb appetite, plus keep your body functioning optimally.

The more muscle mass you have, the more calories you burn, even at rest."

She adds that, when you sleep, your body goes through a natural detox process in which it starts to break down muscle tissue. If you don't consume an adequate amount of protein at breakfast, you're missing the chance to rebuild your muscle tissue. This can result in a metabolic slowdown over time.

"That said, you don't have to make yourself crazy with the numbers," says Cassetty. "Do the best you can!" If you do want to set a more personalized goal for what an adequate amount of protein means, multiply your weight in pounds by 0.36 and aim to eat that many grams of protein per day.

Q How much water do I actually need to drink?

A Consuming an adequate amount of water daily keeps you hydrated, but its benefits go far beyond that. A 2015 study published in *BMC Public Health* found that drinking plenty of plain water daily was associated with lower calorie consumption. Other research, published in *Nutrition Reviews* found that people who gulped down sugar-sweetened drinks prior to or during a meal tended to eat 7.8% more calories than those who drank plain water. In other words, making water your drink of choice may help you eat less.

The recommendations for water intake set by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine are 2.7 liters (or 11 cups) a day for women and 3.7 liters (or 16 cups) daily for men. With this being said, some commonsense cues can also help: If you're thirsty, drink water. And keep in mind that if you are exercising, you'll likely need more. Let the suggestions guide you, but listen to your body.

Q How much weight should I lose weekly to know my diet is working?

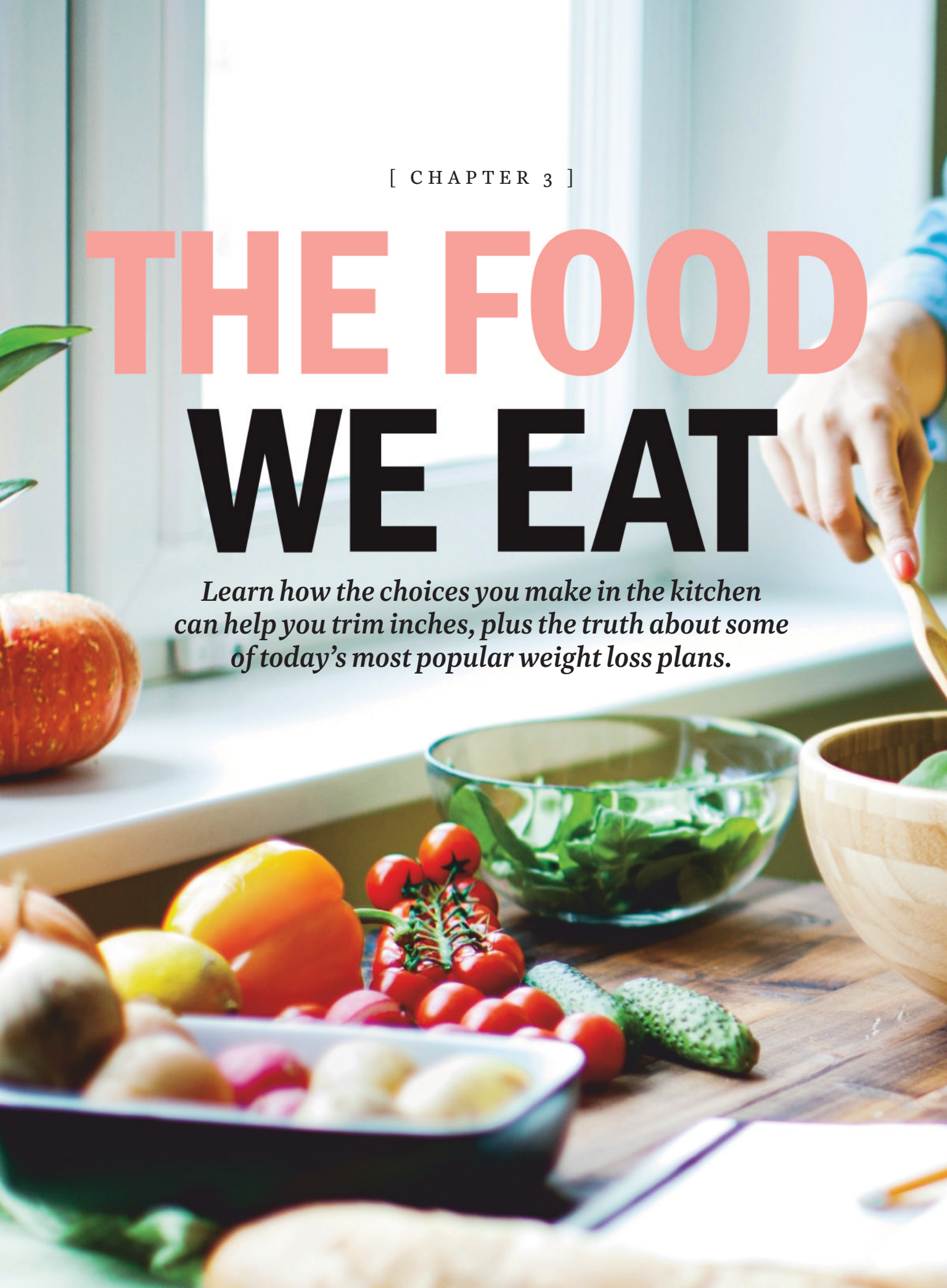
A While we would love to throw out definitive numbers for how many pounds you should be able to lose each week, this is highly individual. It can vary based on age, sex, starting weight and underlying health issues, among others. This is why Cassetty encourages her clients to focus on non-scale victories. "Weight loss is so nuanced and unpredictable, which is why I'd suggest avoiding a goal weight or size and focusing on healthy behaviors that you can sustain and that make you feel good," she says.


So, perhaps, the focus should be on how the diet is making you feel. Do you have more energy? Are you feeling less bloated? Do your clothes fit better? These are wins that prove the changes are working, even if the number on the scale isn't dropping drastically.

[CHAPTER 3]

THE FOOD WE EAT

Learn how the choices you make in the kitchen can help you trim inches, plus the truth about some of today's most popular weight loss plans.





*What you put in your
body is indeed the
driving factor behind
whether or not
you shed pounds.*

SHRINKING YOUR EATING WINDOW

THE FACTS ON INTERMITTENT FASTING

The popularity of these plans has exploded in recent years. Learn what the science says and if they're right for you. BY MARKHAM HEID, WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ALYSSA SYBERTZ

Most fad diets don't live up to the hype, let alone serious scientific scrutiny. But intermittent fasting (IF) seems to be an exception. These plans involve going without caloric foods or drinks for an extended period of time—anywhere from 16 hours to several days—and they have become increasingly popular. Research has also found them to be effective for weight loss. In a 2020 study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*,

subjects chose between 5:2 fasting (see page 57), the Mediterranean diet and the Paleo diet and followed their chosen program for 12 months. At the end of one year, those who had done the fasting approach lost 42% more weight than those on the Mediterranean diet and 122% more weight than the people on Paleo. It's no wonder that nearly a quarter of Americans who have tried a specific diet in the past year chose intermittent fasting, according to the 2021 Food and Health Survey

from the International Food Information Council.

Much of the research into where these weight loss and health-boosting benefits come from has been conducted on people with type 2 diabetes. “People with diabetes should be those who benefit most from intermittent fasting,” says Benjamin Horne, PhD, director of cardiovascular and genetic epidemiology at Intermountain Healthcare in Utah, who has co-authored several recent papers on

*Changing when you
eat instead of what
you eat may be
all you need to do.*



the effects of IF among people with diabetes. Indeed, a 2017 study in the *World Journal of Diabetes* found that just two weeks of intermittent fasting led to significant weight loss (more than 3 pounds, on average) as well as improvements in glucose levels. “It’s possible that intermittent fasting could lead to reduced insulin resistance,” says Kerry Mansell, co-author of that study and a professor in the College of Pharmacy and Nutrition at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada.

supported by solid research—is that fasting kicks off a kind of cellular cleansing process called autophagy that removes old or unhealthy cells and allows new ones to flourish. Based on this work, some experts argue that the human body isn’t designed for the modern food environment and its three-meals-a-day-plus-snacks eating schedule, which was only adopted by the masses in the last 200 years. They say intermittent fasting may more closely resemble the way humans ate

important nutritional requirements different from those of the general population. These groups should not fast until the risks and benefits are better understood, experts say.

People who are taking medications to lower their blood sugar should also steer clear. For a 2018 study in the journal *Diabetic Medicine*, researchers in New Zealand found that the incidence of hypoglycemia, or dangerously low blood sugar, did increase among people with type 2 diabetes who were on these drugs and attempted intermittent fasting. “If you are taking medications that are aimed at reducing the amount of glucose in your blood, together with fasting, these can cause potentially fatal hypoglycemia,” Horne says. “It’s not a minor safety risk.” For people who aren’t taking drugs to lower their blood sugar, Horne says the risk of hypoglycemia seems to be very low. What’s more, at least one very small trial (of just three people) found that adopting an intermittent fasting diet allowed diabetes patients to stop taking their insulin drugs altogether.

Once you have the go-ahead to try IF, the next step is to choose your plan. Several different approaches fall under the intermittent fasting umbrella. Among the most common are time-restricted eating, alternate-day fasting, the 5:2 diet and one meal a day.

The first of these—time-restricted eating—involves squeezing all of your day’s calories into a single “feeding window” of six to eight hours. For example, someone on this diet may eat between noon and 6 p.m. each day and avoid all caloric foods and drinks for the other 18 hours of the day. The eating window can be tailored to your schedule and begin at any point during the day, as long as you close the kitchen when it’s over. This form of IF is the most popular as many people find it to be the easiest way to transition from eating three meals a day.

‘EVEN WHEN PEOPLE AREN’T LOSING WEIGHT ON A FASTING REGIMEN, RESEARCH HAS FOUND THAT INSULIN SENSITIVITY IMPROVES. YOU DON’T SEE THIS WITH CALORIC-RESTRICTION DIETS.’

—Benjamin Horne, PhD

Research supports this hypothesis. Some work on people with diabetes has found that intermittent fasting may increase insulin sensitivity and also reduce insulin levels in the blood. This is a big deal. “Essentially, fasting is doing what we prescribe diabetes medications to do, which is to improve insulin sensitivity,” Horne says. This effect will also help nondiabetics shed pounds, as it sharpens the body’s ability to utilize carbs and sugar as fuel instead of storing them as fat. Plus, since insulin resistance is associated with higher levels of inflammation and other risk factors for cardiovascular disease, it can also boost health in the long term. “Even when people aren’t losing weight on a fasting regimen, some research has found that insulin sensitivity improves markedly,” Horne says. “This is something you typically don’t see with other caloric-restriction diets.”

In addition to its effects on insulin, one of the leading hypotheses on the perks of IF—which is already

for most of our species’ history, when we had to hunt and gather our food. Extended periods of fasting also forces the body to use up its stores of glucose and switch over to burning fat for fuel instead, which is when those stubborn trouble spots finally begin to shrink.

GETTING STARTED

The first step before starting any new eating plan is to talk with your physician. They should be able to help you weigh the benefits and risks, identify dietary approaches to avoid nutritional deficiencies and, if necessary, adjust any medications you’re taking to avoid problems. There are groups of people for whom IF is not the best approach to weight loss. Nutrient deficiencies, inadequate protein intake (especially if you’re older), and other forms of malnutrition are possible if you’re fasting. The safety profile of intermittent fasting is also not well mapped among women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, or in young kids—all groups with



TIME-RESTRICTED EATING (12 p.m.–6 p.m.)

8 a.m.
black coffee

10 a.m.
berry iced tea

12 p.m.
three-egg omelet with mushrooms, bell peppers and cheese, wheat toast and fruit

3 p.m.
strawberry banana smoothie with Greek yogurt, protein powder and spinach

A Sample Day

TASTY AND SATIATING MENU INSPIRATION FOR THREE POPULAR FORMS OF INTERMITTENT FASTING.

5:30 p.m.
sheet pan Mediterranean-spiced chicken thighs with carrots, cauliflower and artichokes, a garden salad and a glass of red wine

5:2 FASTING

Feast Day
8 a.m.
coffee with a splash of cream, oatmeal with berries and honey

1 p.m.
cobb salad with avocado

4 p.m.
whole-grain crackers with hummus

7 p.m. cheesy pasta with salmon and asparagus

8 p.m.
dark chocolate chunk cookie

Fast Day
8 a.m.
coffee with a splash of cream

11 a.m.
lemon sparkling water

1 p.m.
minestrone soup



5 p.m.
rooibos tea

ONE MEAL A DAY



8 a.m.
black coffee

11 a.m.
cucumber-infused water

2 p.m.
turkey club sandwich with bacon and avocado, served with french fries and a Caesar salad

6 p.m.
chamomile herbal tea



Meanwhile, someone on an alternate-day fasting diet eats normally one day, but the next day consumes few (500 or fewer) or no calories. For people who can abstain or significantly cut back eating for an entire day, this approach offers the body a full 24-hour break from digestion to reap the benefits of fasting. Similarly, the 5:2 diet involves eating normally five days a week but fasting or eating fewer than 500 calories on the other two nonconsecutive days. Other popular approaches include one meal a day, or OMAD, in which people fast for 23

hours and eat just one meal each day, and extended fasts, in which people fast for over 24 hours at a time.

One thing all forms of intermittent fasting have in common is that there are no restrictions on what or how much you eat—as long as all of your food is consumed during your eating window, it’s fair game. That said, you will likely see results quicker if you stick to fresh and nourishing whole foods (such as those discussed on pages 68 to 75), as opposed to unhealthy processed ones. All of the plans also allow unlimited water,

tea and black coffee during fasting periods, which can help curb feelings of hunger and prevent overeating when your eating window arrives.

“I think time-restricted eating is probably the most common, followed by fasting two days a week,” Horne says. “But at the moment, I would say there is not one plan that stands out as a best option.” The “right” plan, he adds, is the one a patient will stick with. After all, if the more intense fasting programs turn out to be most beneficial, that doesn’t really matter if people can’t adhere to them.

FAVORING FATS

THE CASE FOR KETO

High-fat, low-carb diets are all the rage—but are they really a good way to lose weight? The answer may surprise you.

BY MARKHAM HEID, WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ALYSSA SYBERTZ

Don't let its fancy name fool you. A ketogenic diet is, essentially, a low-carb, high-fat diet—albeit one taken to extremes. “In a clinical setting, a strict ketogenic diet would involve ultralow-carb consumption, like 20 or 30 grams a day,” says Dr. Eric Westman, director of the Lifestyle Medicine Clinic at Duke University. That’s about the number of carbohydrates in one small apple.

Westman’s research on carb-restricted diets suggests they can help reduce appetite, spur weight loss and improve markers of heart disease. His findings aren’t outliers. From Atkins and South Beach to Mediterranean and the Zone, low-carb, high-fat

diets—or “LCHF” plans—are all the rage, and growing evidence suggests they’re a big improvement on the typical carb-heavy American diet. But the keto diet is the most carb-restrictive member of the LCHF gang.

Along with slashing carbs, a ketogenic plan also calls for limiting your protein consumption. If you know your macronutrients, you recognize that cutting carbs and restricting protein means seriously upping your fat intake. And that’s exactly what a true ketogenic diet entails. When building your meals, you’ll aim to consume roughly 70% to 80% of your calories from fat, 15% to 20% from protein and 5% to 10% from carbs.

Fats come in many forms, and they will make up the vast majority of a keto diet.





(For comparison's sake, the average American gets roughly 50% of their calories from carbs, 15% from protein and 30% from fat, per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.) Like the guidance to cut carbs, this advice to rein in protein intake dovetails with some of the latest nutrition science, which suggests limiting protein can lower risk for disease and extend life for people younger than 65.

WHAT THE DIET CAN DO

So what, exactly, does “ketogenic” mean? The name refers to a specific type of energy-carrying molecule, called a ketone. “Most people are always in a state of glucosis, meaning they’re burning glucose from carbohydrates for energy,” Westman says. “But you determine what your body burns for fuel based on what you feed it.” By severely restricting carbs and increasing your fat intake, your body can shift into a state of “ketosis,” which means it’s burning fat instead of glucose. “Ketosis used to be considered abnormal, but it can actually be very healthy,” Westman says.

In fact, ketogenic diets have been used for nearly a century to treat seizures, says Gary Yellen, a professor of neurobiology at Harvard Medical School. “It dates back to studies from the 1920s that found this kind of diet was like a sustainable form of fasting, which we’ve known, supposedly since antiquity, to be beneficial for epilepsy,” he says. It’s not clear just how a ketogenic diet works for seizures. But Yellen says seizures are like “electrical storms” in the brain. “There are potassium channels in the brain that, when open, seem to have a quieting influence on this electrical excitation,” he says. “We think these channels work better when the brain is using ketones instead of glucose for energy.” Even when epilepsy medications have failed, a ketogenic diet can work wonders, he says.

‘MOST PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS IN A STATE OF GLUCOSIS, BURNING CARBS FOR ENERGY. BUT YOU DETERMINE WHAT YOUR BODY BURNS BASED ON WHAT YOU FEED IT.’

—Eric Westman, MD

That’s good news for people with epilepsy. But can it help the rest of us? Westman’s research suggests a ketogenic diet can help treat obesity, type 2 diabetes and fatty liver disease. But for people suffering from those conditions—as well as older adults and kids—Westman says a keto plan can have “huge impacts” on nutrient intakes and health. You’d want to try it only with a doctor or dietitian’s supervision, he says.

“But if you’re a young and healthy adult, I have no safety concerns about removing carbs,” he adds. “It’s really not a radical concept.” You may experience short-term issues such as bad breath, constipation and flu-like symptoms, a phenomenon known as the “keto flu.” (Drinking lots of water and keeping your electrolytes up can help.) But the lasting benefits could include reduced hunger, increased energy and weight loss. In a study from the medical weight loss program at Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center, participants with type 2 diabetes who followed a keto diet for at least six months lost an average of 63 pounds—plus, 86% of those who continued with the plan for a full year were able to reduce or eliminate their insulin use. Some preliminary research from Johns Hopkins University even suggests memory improvements and better cognitive function in early Alzheimer’s patients.

More research is needed to determine whether the kind of extreme carb restriction associated with keto diets is necessary to unlock all these benefits, especially if you’re healthy. “Ketogenic and other very-low-carbohydrate diets can be quite challenging to follow over the long term, and the possibility of adverse effects has not been ruled out,” says Dr. David Ludwig, a professor of nutrition at Harvard Medical School. “Usually, such severe restriction isn’t necessary.” He points out that not all carbs are equal, and that the speed with which a carbohydrate food affects your blood sugar—what’s known as its glycemic index—makes a difference. Indeed, dieters have found success on what’s termed “lazy keto,” or keeping carb consumption below 50 grams per day instead of the much stricter 25 grams per day. This doesn’t always put your body in ketosis, but the limiting of carbs typically still results in weight loss.

One dubious practice of some keto diet adherents is using urine, blood or breath test kits to check their circulating ketone levels. While those kits can tell you if your body is indeed burning ketones instead of glucose, which can be helpful if you’re someone who likes data, Westman says there’s no good evidence that one ketone level is better than another. “The level of water in a stream doesn’t necessarily tell you how much water is flowing through it,” he says. “In the same way, measuring the level of ketones in the blood doesn’t tell you the whole story.”

HOW FAR TO GO

In addition to the groups mentioned above, people who have liver or kidney problems may want to steer clear of keto. There’s also a risk of nutrient deficiencies, though if you eat plenty of low-carb, nutrient-rich vegetables that won’t be a problem. The same goes for people with or at

risk for heart disease who are worried about consuming too much saturated fat. As long as they are balancing out fatty meats with plant-based fats, it shouldn't be an issue. In fact, a Harvard University study found that people who ate a high-fat diet focused on these plant-based fats were 23% less likely to develop heart disease than those who followed a higher-carb diet. All that said, the keto approach is still significantly different than the standard American diet, so getting the OK from your doctor is smart.

Once you're ready to get started, the goal of a keto diet is to keep your daily carb consumption between 20 and 50 grams per day—the lower the better if you are trying to achieve ketosis. Many keto dieters tend to favor animal fats and proteins, filling up on foods such as eggs, fish, poultry, beef, pork, lamb, bacon, butter and cheese, and always the full-fat or fattier version. But experts recommend balancing these animal products with plant-based sources of healthy fats such as avocado, coconut, olives, nuts, seeds, tofu, tempeh, and oils such as coconut, avocado and olive oil. The rest of your plate should contain leafy greens such as kale, spinach, arugula and cabbage, or low-carb vegetables such as bell peppers, green beans, cucumbers, broccoli, cauliflower and spaghetti squash. Berries, citrus fruits and melon can be enjoyed in moderation, as can dry wine and hard alcohol. Grains, legumes and anything baked with white flour and sugar are off-limits.

Until science sorts out all the ins and outs of balancing carbs, protein and fats for optimal health, going full keto in an effort to maintain a state of ketosis may be overkill. But based on the latest research, cutting carbs in favor of healthy fats will certainly get your scale trending downward, if that's where you want it to go.



The keto diet emphasizes a low-fat, high-carb approach.

A Sample Day

IT'S NOT AS RESTRICTIVE AS YOU MIGHT THINK.
HERE, EASY AND DELICIOUS SUGGESTIONS
FOR A DAY ON A KETOGENIC DIET.

8 a.m. coffee with cream

shaved Parmesan and a
lemon-olive oil dressing

9 a.m. two eggs over
easy with cheese, bacon
and avocado

4 p.m. salted pistachios,
almonds and sunflower seeds

1 p.m. Mixed greens salad
with grilled shrimp,
cucumber, avocado slices,

7 p.m. pan-seared steak
with roasted broccoli and
cheesy cauliflower mash

PRIORITIZING PRODUCE

THE POWER OF PLANT-BASED

Can you shed pounds by eating more of the foods that grow from the ground? Discover the weight-loss and health-promoting perks of this lifestyle. BY HOLLY LEBOWITZ ROSSI

By the time she reached her mid-40s, Laura McAughan had given birth to four sons, ate a “typical Western diet,” and wasn’t particularly concerned with losing weight. But following a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, she was forced to take her health seriously, and quickly. She adopted a plant-based diet she describes as “vegan-plus-seafood” and—as she took other steps to manage her MS—lost 25 pounds that she has kept off for more than a decade. In her experience, says McAughan, who is healthy and active at 54, “a whole-foods, plant-based diet is really the only thing that’s helpful [for weight loss]—and not just for a minute. It’s just the food you eat from now on.”

MORE THAN JUST GREENS

There are as many ways of eating as there are eaters in this world—and one person’s plant-rich diet might

look very different from another’s. Sometimes called “plant-based,” “plant-forward,” or “plant-strong,” these diets, simply put, prioritize plants on the plate.

“A plant-based diet doesn’t necessarily mean you’re only eating plants,” says Stacy Kennedy, a registered nutritionist and dietitian. Ways of eating that prioritize nutrient-dense, unprocessed foods, minimal sugar and salt, and diverse ingredients all count as “plant-based,” even if they involve some meat eating. Someone who is building more plant-based nutrition into their diet, even by adding a single serving of fresh fruit or vegetable to their dinner plate, “gets a gold star” in Kennedy’s book.

Dr. P.K. Newby, a nutrition scientist and author of *Food & Nutrition: What Everyone Needs to Know*, defines plant-based eating as constructing meals of between 75% and 80% plants.

One thing that successful plant-based diets have in common is that they involve real foods that are kept as close as possible to their whole, natural state—and processed as minimally as possible. These include fruits; vegetables; nuts; legumes such as beans, peas and lentils; whole grains such as oats, buckwheat, barley, bulgur and quinoa; and seeds such as chia and flax.

A plant-based diet is distinct from other ways of eating, though the term is often used to describe other diets. For example, a vegan diet is free of any foods that come from animals, including milk, eggs and honey, in addition to meat. People who eat vegan diets might also avoid animal products such as leather, and many vegans cite environmental justice, sustainability and compassion for living things as reasons for their commitment. “Veganism isn’t plant-based, it’s plant-only,” says Newby. Vegetarianism,

by contrast, generally refers to nutrition that comes primarily from nonanimal sources. Vegetarians might consume some animal products such as eggs or dairy, that do not require killing animals to source the foods. Other vegetarians might eat limited meats, such as fish or seafood (these eaters are sometimes called “pescatarians” or “flexitarians”).

WHY THIS DIET HELPS WITH WEIGHT LOSS

A combination of two crucial factors makes a plant-based diet helpful with weight loss, experts say. “Plants are full of fiber and low in calories,” says Dr. Angela Fitch, associate director of the Massachusetts General Hospital Weight Center. That means that “the more plants you eat, the fuller you may feel given the volume of space they take up in your stomach,” she notes.

Called “volumetrics,” this approach to eating means that whole, plant-based foods give you a feeling of satisfaction and fullness with fewer calories than foods that have been processed and amended with nutrient-void calories. The list of foods that are best for volumetrics is overwhelmingly plant-based, because plants have high water and fiber content relative to their lower calorie counts. That means you can eat larger portions of fruits and vegetables than if you were eating meat or processed foods. This has psychological benefits as well, dialing back stress around portion control as well as slowing down the pace of eating as you tuck into a large salad or hearty bowl of vegetable soup.

But what sets it apart from other approaches? “We know that almost any diet can lead to temporary weight loss,” says Dr. Vanita Rahman, an internal medicine physician and

Focusing on plants means getting plenty of nutrients—not to mention flavor.



clinic director at the Barnard Medical Center in Washington, D.C. For weight loss to remain long term, the diet needs to be sustainable.

A plant-based diet, Rahman says, is just that—“heartily, filling, versatile,” and built to last. It also carries health benefits such as helping regulate blood sugar, blood pressure and inflammation, as well as feeding the healthy bacteria that live in our guts and support digestion. When our overall health is in balance, Rahman says, weight loss can more easily follow—especially when we are able to stick with the good eating habits. “The bottom line is that people just start to feel better eating this way, and that’s what propels them to keep going,” she says.

Tracye McQuirter, a public health nutritionist and author of the book, *Ageless Vegan: The Secret to Living a Long and Healthy Plant-Based Life*, has conducted three “21-Day Vegan Fresh Start” programs since 2020 through her organization 10 Million Black Vegan Women Movement. Upward of 20,000 women have participated, and pre- and post-program surveys found an average weight loss of 9 pounds per participant, with 92% of participants

‘THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT PEOPLE JUST START TO FEEL BETTER EATING THIS WAY, AND THAT’S WHAT PROPELS THEM TO KEEP GOING.’

—Vanita Rahman, MD

reporting a weight loss in the February 2022 program alone.

“Weight loss is often the reason women want to do the program,” says McQuirter. “That’s a valid reason, because whole-food, plant-based food is so nutrient-dense and so fiber-rich.” And the volumetrics principle helps people feel less deprived as they change their eating habits. Because of this, she says, “We can suggest people not worry about eating less, but think about eating until they’re full.”

THE SCIENCE OF PLANT-FORWARD PLANS

Many scientists who have investigated the connection between diet and weight support plant-based eating for those who want to shed pounds. In one study, published in 2020 in the journal *JAMA Network Open*, participants ate a diet of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes with no calorie limit for 16 weeks. When compared with participants who made no dietary changes, the plant-based eaters lost an average of 14 pounds—and they also displayed measurable decreases in overall fat mass and visceral fat, which is the health-threatening fat that forms around internal organs.

This and other studies support the idea that a plant-based diet may increase what’s called “postprandial energy expenditure,” or the amount

of calorie burn that takes place after eating. In other words, studies suggest, your metabolism may get a boost from plant-based nutrition.

The body of research on plant-based nutrition and weight loss is evolving in real time, with researchers calling for a more nuanced study of why—and whether—plants actually help us lose weight. “Plants are generally lower in calories... so they are likely beneficial to human health,” says Fitch, “but data on weight management directly is limited.”

Studies are often complicated by other factors, such as calorie restriction or small sample sizes. In 2020, Dr. Elizabeth Tran, a physician based in Norway, published a review of 19 different studies to determine if plant-based diets have a measurable impact on weight. In every one of the studies, participants reported weight reduction. Even so, most of the studies investigated small populations with underlying medical conditions such as type 2 diabetes or cardiovascular disease. Additionally, a majority of the participants were female, in a limited age group, and were studied for a short period of time. Beyond that, many studies incorporated other variables—such as eating low-fat foods—as well as following only a vegetarian or vegan diet.

“Although the publications might suggest weight loss in some patient groups, the conclusion that a plant-based diet leads to long-term weight loss cannot be drawn,” Tran says. She calls for more randomized, controlled studies of the general population, without low-fat or low-calorie restrictions and with longer study durations. But studies clearly support the general health benefits of plant-based eating, including lower risks of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension and certain cancers—and better overall health can make it easier to reach and maintain a healthy weight.



Try replacing half the meat in your burger with chopped mushrooms.

WHAT TO CHOOSE

Overall nutrition is paramount for a plant-based diet to help with weight loss—after all, potato chips are a plant-based food but are also loaded with fat and salt, with minimal nutrition from the potatoes themselves. “What’s most important for weight management is to eat varied nutrients from fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, nuts, and limited amounts of total and saturated fats and sugars,” Tran says. This means prioritizing foods that are altered from their natural state as little as possible. Reaching for a snack of an apple with a swipe of nut butter, for example, could be a better choice than a granola bar that contains added sugar and other manufactured ingredients.

Creating as colorful a dinner plate as possible is a good indicator that you’re getting a variety of nutrients, called phytochemicals, that are only found in the plant kingdom. Phytochemical superstars include berries, pears, broccoli, leafy greens such as spinach, and root vegetables such as carrots.

As healthful as fruits and vegetables are, a balanced diet needs more than those foods to support overall health, as well as weight loss. Nutrient-rich carbohydrates help regulate energy, blood sugar and digestion, and are found in whole grains and starchy vegetables such as potatoes and corn. Protein is another crucial ingredient in a healthy plant-based diet—and can be challenging for those who eschew meat altogether. Beans, nuts, lentils, and soy foods such as tofu or edamame are excellent sources of plant-based proteins. Over the course of your day, advises Kennedy, eat a variety of protein sources—such as combining hummus with whole-wheat pita bread—to ensure you are getting the full complement of amino acids your body needs to build muscle, regulate hormones and perform other crucial health-giving functions.



Paint your plate with delicious colors.

A Fresh Approach to a Healthier Way of Eating

NUTRITIONIST AND DIETITIAN STACY KENNEDY SETS THE TABLE FOR A FULL MENU OF DELICIOUS, NOURISHING PLANT-BASED OPTIONS.

Breakfast

overnight oats with unsweetened nondairy milk, frozen or fresh berries, chopped walnuts and a dash of cinnamon or ginger

Lunch

Greek salad with avocado, roasted chickpeas, sliced beets, and hummus/tahini dressing made with lemon and oregano

Snack

dates stuffed with peanut butter, or a simple

nut-fruit combo such as almonds paired with a clementine or an orange

Dinner

stir-fried bell peppers, carrots and snap peas over rice noodles, topped with crispy air-fried tofu, shredded fresh cabbage, chopped peanuts and your favorite brand of pad Thai or curry sauce

Dessert

chocolate raspberry chia pudding

Sustaining plant-based eating year-round, far beyond farmers market season or when grocery stores are teeming with fresh produce, doesn’t have to be a chore. “Fresh is best,” says McQuirter, but frozen fruits and vegetables are an excellent second choice, especially if you do not have access to ripe, fresh produce. Frozen food is “available year-round, often flash-frozen so it’s nutrient-rich, and it can be very inexpensive,” she says.

Look for ways to maximize your access to plant-based foods. McQuirter

encourages, “recognize the plant foods you’re already eating” to dial back intimidation if you are making a dietary change. Identify a few favorite dishes and work on swapping plant-based ingredients for meats. And connect with local food co-ops, corner stores, groceries and farm shares in your area to learn where you can most easily and affordably access plant-based nutrition. From there, she says, just feed yourself: “The more you eat healthy food, the more you want to eat healthy food.”



Your organs benefit from simply staying hydrated with water or fresh smoothies.

‘detox’ through breathing, sweating, urinating and pooping,” confirms registered dietitian nutritionist Lauren Harris-Pincus, founder of NutritionStarringYOU.com. “A restrictive diet is unnecessary to rid the body of impurities, and if these multiple natural detoxification pathways are not doing their job effectively, you need a hospital, not a special diet.”

Many of the typical detox diets involve a strict regimen reportedly designed to allow organs to “rest,” while stimulating the liver to potentially rid the body of excess toxins, boost circulation and increase nutrient intake. The most common detox diets usually involve one or more of the following:

- Abstaining from eating (aka fasting) for one to three full days
- Only drinking juices, smoothies, water, tea or some other liquid concoction such as vinegar, salted water or lemon juice
- Eliminating common allergens
- Popping supplements or taking herbal remedies
- Using laxatives, enemas or colonics

So how does all this impact the brain—and the body? It doesn’t always work out quite as you may think.

FACT VS. FICTION

Since they often involve cutting out a certain food group or severely limiting calories, those “detox” strategies listed above do often result in speedy weight loss. But most of this is water weight. Nearly every time, those who “cleanse” gain that weight back—and then some, according to a 2017 review in the journal *Current Gastroenterology Reports*. “It won’t be lasting weight loss that will benefit your overall health or well-being,” says Roxana Ehsani, a registered

MYTH-BUSTING CAN CLEANSSES REALLY WORK?

Dietitians give you the skinny about those trendy “detox” diets—and if they’re helpful or harmful. BY KARLA WALSH

Sure, you cleanse your face, your palate between courses of a tasting menu and perhaps your social media feed from toxic frenemies. But do you really need to cleanse your body by following a detox diet? If you ask a celebrity preparing for a red carpet event or an influencer seeking virality, the answer is a definitive “why not?!” But according to the registered dietitians we spoke with—who have

decades of collective experience—the better answer is “why bother?”

There is no standard definition of a “cleanse” because “they’re not real. Your body naturally ‘cleanses’ for you,” explains Alex Caspero, a St. Louis-based registered dietitian and the owner of Delish Knowledge.

Our liver and kidneys work very hard to remove unwanted substances from our bodies, and “we also

dietitian nutritionist in Miami and a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

That's not to say all diets are bad—but if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. "Anything sold as a 'magic bullet,' especially in the form of a cleanse, is just marketing BS," notes Caspero. "You don't need to cleanse your body. Most people who are pushing cleanses are pushing fear-based weight loss marketing. As a registered dietitian, it's a huge red flag."

In addition to setting you up for a weight loss roller coaster (which research has linked to worse health outcomes than remaining steady at a higher number on the scale), detox diets are damaging to the mind too. According to a July 2018 study from Hungary, overly restrictive diets can increase risk for orthorexia, or a fixation on "clean" eating, as well as purging-related eating disorders. In other words, cleanses can lay the foundation for an unhealthy relationship with food in the long term.

DOES A HEALTHY "CLEANSE" EXIST?

We're making things more complicated than they need to be, Caspero believes. Focusing on healthy foods and drinking plenty of water will help support the organs that are involved in your body's own detoxifying systems.

But what about if you overdo it on vacation or have a big event, such as a wedding, on the horizon? Is there any way to cleanse without crashing? "It's important to try not to live in a reward-punish mindset where you feel you need to 'repent' for eating or drinking on a vacation or at an event. It's at best, unnecessary, and at worst, can lead to disordered eating tendencies or inadequate nutrition," Harris-Pincus warns. That said, keeping your water bottle full and loading your plate with

vegetables might help you feel better faster, plus keep your natural detox systems humming along.

None of us can—or should—expect to eat 100% perfectly every single day, says Ehsani. The key, she adds, is to "make an effort to eat healthy, whole foods, treat your body well and support its healthy processes over the majority of your lifespan."

That could mean simply trying to add a bonus serving of vegetables to each meal of the day, drink less alcohol, eat less processed foods, and focusing on fiber-rich fare. These bulky, nutrient-rich foods will help you poop—detoxing for the win!—while also making you feel more satisfied with fewer calories. And that sounds a lot better than any cleanse ever could.

Your Food Rx

"There's no such thing as a 'detox food' per se, but there are some foods that can have positive effects on the liver, which is part of our body's natural detoxification system," explains registered dietitian nutritionist Lauren Harris-Pincus. Stock up on these ingredients to show your liver some TLC as it "cleans house."

Dark Leafy Greens Kale, spinach and collards are jam-packed with



vitamins and minerals that protect your body against damaging free radicals. Plus, greens' dietary fiber will keep your digestive tract moving and, in turn, "detox" the body naturally by helping escort out waste.

Berries They're high in anthocyanins, potent antioxidants that can help to protect the liver and assist with its function. They're also very high in dietary fiber, which works to keep your



digestive tract moving and functioning optimally.

Coffee The beverage helps decrease inflammation and the risk of developing liver cancer and fatty liver disease.



Apples Their peel, in particular, contains a flavonoid called quercetin, which is linked to improved liver health.



Cruciferous Vegetables

Veggies like broccoli, cabbage and Brussels sprouts contain a compound called sulforaphane that supports the liver's natural detoxification enzymes, suppresses inflammation and offers anti-cancer properties.



Water Its superpower is making you pee. Since your kidneys naturally filter out any toxins through urine, drinking more H2O will help you naturally "detox" via your kidneys.



THE

25

BEST FOODS
TO HELP YOU
LOSE

BY LAMBETH HOCHWALD

Depending on what you hear, you may be told to avoid fruit, grains and legumes and eat lots of protein to slim down. Yet another diet might extol the benefits of filling up on fruits and vegetables and limiting animal products. Indeed, many people's quests to lose weight often hit a roadblock at the grocery store or make a U-turn when they start discussing their food choices with others. To clear things up, we polled registered dietitians and nutrition experts to create a list of 25 delicious foods that will support your weight loss journey, plus simple and tasty ways to prepare them.

1



STRAWBERRIES

Packed with fiber, ounce per ounce strawberries also have more vitamin C than even an orange. In fact, eight strawberries will give you all the vitamin C you need for the day. In a recent study, vitamin C was even linked to fat loss—another win. “They’re also really low in calories and what I love about them is that they’re a chameleon food,” says Bonnie Taub-Dix, a registered dietitian nutritionist in New York. “You could combine them with ricotta and cereal for breakfast or you could have them over a lunch salad.” Consider buying them when they’re in season and freeze them for use in smoothies or cobblers all year long.

2

LENTILS

A fan favorite thanks to their potent mix of protein and fiber, lentils are a powerhouse. Research has shown that regularly eating lentils may help you manage and prevent diabetes, and a separate study found that four weekly servings led to more effective weight loss. Combine them with your favorite veggies for an ideal plant-based meal, says Jinan Banna, a registered dietitian and associate professor of nutrition at the University of Hawaii. “I like to add some veggies and pesto to fill the dish with even more fiber and healthy fat.”



3

AVOCADOS

Technically a fruit, avocados are packed with healthy fat and 20 vitamins and minerals, including vitamins A, C, E, K and B6. In studies, they have been shown to help lower LDL, or “bad” cholesterol. “Avocados also keep you satiated thanks to their high fiber content, too,” Taub-Dix says. “That’s why I tell people to think outside the guac and use it instead of mayo on a sandwich or make it the star in your next pesto sauce.”



4

YOGURT

Reach for Greek yogurt due to its great combination of calcium, carbohydrates (from the milk sugar), probiotics and versatility. Thanks to the dose of good gut bacteria in yogurt (make sure the yogurt you choose contains at least two live and active strains, such as *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophilus*) you’ll get an immune boost.

Yogurt helps you stay full and maintains muscle, too, says Jeanette Schaible, a registered dietitian in North Andover, Massachusetts.

“Stick with the plain option instead of flavored, including vanilla, which have a lot of extra sugar that isn’t helpful for weight loss or feeling full.” Instead, she recommends simply dressing up yogurt to taste sweet by adding fruit and cinnamon at breakfast, or savory, as a sub-in for mayo in chicken salad for lunch.





5

CRUCIFEROUS VEGETABLES

An incredibly nutrient dense option in the produce aisle, cruciferous veggies such as broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts can help fill you up and provide extra energy-boosting nutrients—all with minimal calories. The star ingredient in cruciferous veggies, however, is sulforaphane, which has been shown to have weight loss benefits. There are myriad ways to prep them, too. “If you’re not a fan of steaming, try roasting or sautéing them with a little bit of olive oil, garlic or even a sprinkle of some Parmesan cheese,” suggests registered dietitian nutritionist Patricia Bannan, author of *From Burnout to Balance*. “This will add more flavor and texture.”

APPLES

Fruit, especially apples, are fiber-rich—one medium apple contains about 5 grams of fiber—to help regulate digestion and keep you feeling full. “To get your apple a day, pair one with nut butter, yogurt dip or a handful of almonds or pistachios for a satisfying snack,” Bannan says.

6



7

EGGS

Eggs are a versatile protein source that are rich in vitamin D and choline (a B vitaminlike nutrient found in the yolk) that is often sold as a dietary supplement to “burn fat.” However, it’s the protein in eggs that appeals to dieters most. “Protein is more satisfying and takes longer to digest, which can help with weight loss,” Bannan says. “There are so many options—you can make ahead a batch of hard-boiled eggs for a quick snack or breakfast on the go, make a veggie-filled omelet in the morning or serve up scrambled eggs with sliced avocado.”



LEAFY GREENS

Leafy greens such as spinach or kale are nutrient dense, meaning they pack in a lot of fiber plus micronutrients such as vitamins A, B, C and K, while also being low in calories. “Bulking up meals with leafy greens can help you feel more full, and make portions a little bigger,” Bannan says. “Enjoy a green salad with grilled chicken, avocado and chopped nuts, add spinach or kale to a pasta dish or sauté with a bit of olive oil and garlic.”

9

QUINOA

Not only is quinoa packed with fiber and protein, but a quinoa salad with chopped veggies and chickpeas is a great item to add to your daily rotation given all of the fiber, protein, vitamins and minerals you’ll get per bite, suggests Banna. “To prepare, simmer the quinoa for 15 minutes, chop the veggies and mix everything together along with some lemon juice, olive oil and salt and pepper to taste.” Besides this salad, consider subbing quinoa for rice or even using it to make pancakes.



10

OATMEAL

The 4 grams of fiber in 1 cup of oatmeal can help curb snacking before lunchtime, Bannan says. “Compared to other grains, oatmeal contains a good amount of protein, as well as other important vitamins and minerals,” she adds. “Beta-glucan, the particular fiber in oats, slows gastric emptying, suppresses gut hormones and makes you feel fuller longer.” Add some extra staying power to your morning bowl of oats with chopped nuts, fresh berries or nut butter.

11

BEANS

Beans are a plant-based source of both fiber and protein, two nutrients that help keep you feeling fuller for longer, which is great for weight loss, says Bannan. “They’re also very versatile, and come in plenty of varieties, which can help keep meals from becoming boring and repetitive. Canned beans are budget friendly, always in season and take no time to prep.” The fiber will also keep you regular, preventing uncomfortable bloating. Your best bets for recipes: “Add black beans to tacos or chili, make a bean-based veggie burger with kidney beans, or simply toss in some chickpeas to your salad at lunch,” suggests Bannan.



12



SALMON

This fish is known for its health benefits, such as omega-3 fatty acids that are super important for the heart and have some weight loss-specific benefits as well. “There may be a cancer prevention component to salmon and it keeps you full thanks to its protein,” Taub-Dix says. “I’ll grill a giant piece and then I know I’ll have leftovers that I can make the next day into salmon on a salad or I’ll mash it with vegetables, panko and egg and make salmon burgers.”

14

KEFIR

This fermented milk drink made from kefir grains is rich in calcium, protein and B vitamins. It also offers a powerful dose of probiotics or “good” gut bacteria, which has been linked to weight loss. “My favorite way to use kefir is in smoothies and muesli,” shares Bannan. “Or I’ll just sip it as an afternoon snack.”

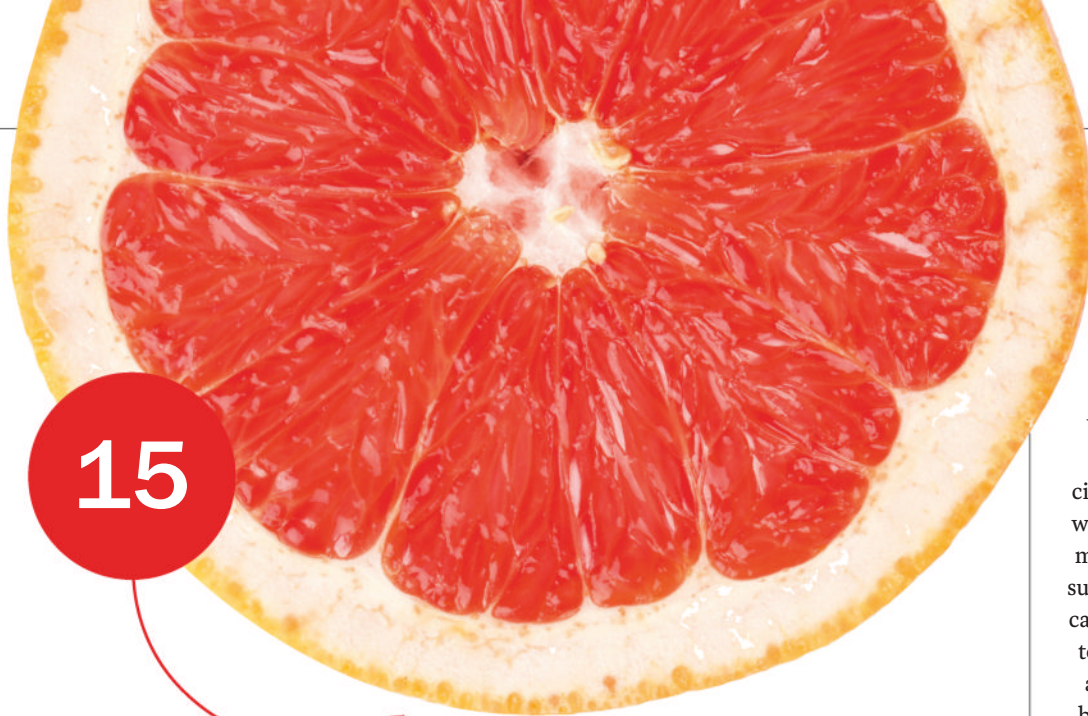


13

ALMONDS

These nuts are a great source of plant protein—a quarter cup provides 6 grams of plant protein—which is a lot given that one egg has 7 grams. In addition, almonds have been shown to be heart-healthy and help reduce LDL cholesterol. “It’s also the nut that is highest in fiber and highest in calcium content,” notes Taub-Dix. While there are endless ways to enjoy almonds, a healthy trail mix is a great way to start. “If you want something sweet, add dried fruit such as dried cranberries,” she says. “Or add a favorite cold cereal and chocolate chips.”





15

GRAPEFRUIT

Tangy grapefruit is fiber-rich and high in water, making it a satisfying citrus fruit to snack on. “Grapefruit also has a low glycemic index, meaning it can help balance blood sugar levels,” Bannan notes. “This may be beneficial for weight loss by providing a long-lasting fuel for your body. In addition, low blood sugar levels can affect your food and sugar cravings, which can cause you to overeat.”

Enjoy it as an afternoon snack, pair it with a handful of pistachios, slice it into a salad or chop some into a yogurt bowl for breakfast.

16

CAYENNE PEPPER

If you can handle a lot of tongue-tingling spice, capsaicin, which is the active ingredient in cayenne pepper, has been found to help boost your metabolism, according to several studies. Add cayenne regularly to your meals and you may even find yourself eating 200 fewer calories per day, according to a study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.



17

GREEN TEA

Green tea is a natural source of antioxidants and caffeine, which can help support metabolism for weight loss. “The main catechin in green tea, called epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), may inhibit carbohydrate digestion and absorption, which could help with weight loss,” Bannan says.

“Enjoy a cup of green tea without added sweeteners or heavy creams for a low-calorie energy boost.” For more benefits, matcha, or green tea powder, is an even more concentrated source of EGCG.

18

APPLE CIDER VINEGAR

Using low- or no-calorie flavorings such as apple cider vinegar can be a great way to add a flavor boost to meals without extra oils or sugars. “Apple cider vinegar can also help when it comes to bitter leafy greens such as kale, collard greens or broccoli rabe, as it can cut out some of the bitterness when added at the end of cooking,” Bannan says. There are also studies that show apple cider vinegar can curb blood sugar spikes when consumed before a meal, while others suggest it can help promote belly fat loss. While this research remains inconclusive, apple cider vinegar, especially organic and unfiltered, is a smart addition to your diet.





19

SWEET POTATOES

No matter how you slice them, sweet potatoes are a smart choice if you're watching your waistline. With 4 grams of protein, prebiotic fiber to feed your healthy gut bugs and all the vitamin A you need for the day (and then some), a tasty sweet potato is an ideal side dish to add to any meal. Consider adding a baked sweet potato, chilled and cut into cubes into your favorite salad, make a creamy sweet potato soup or bake strips of sweet potatoes in the oven. "My favorite way to make sweet potatoes is to switch up my everyday avocado toast by using toasted sweet potato as the base instead of bread," Bannan says. "Simply bake the sweet potato the night before, slice and put in a toaster oven or broil in the oven until heated through or slightly crisped."

20

DARK CHOCOLATE

Two servings of dark chocolate a day are not only super satisfying but dark chocolate also contains flavonoids, heart-healthy antioxidants that can reduce the risk of diabetes and heart disease, according to a Harvard study.

"When you're shopping for dark chocolate, opt for a bar that contains at least 70% cacao since it's lower in sugar and higher in antioxidants compared to milk chocolate," says Bannan. "Have a little dark chocolate with blueberries or walnuts for a healthy snack with staying power."



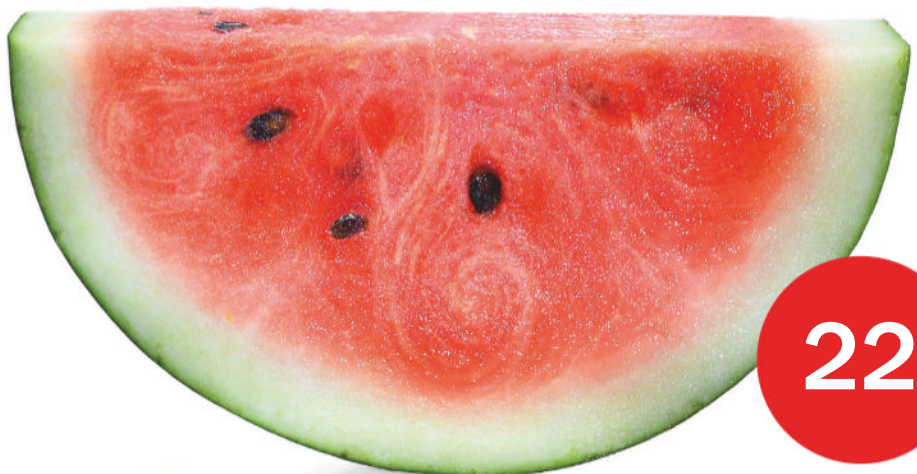
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PISTACHIOS

Pistachios are a healthy snack choice for people who are watching their weight and want to make the most out of every bite. "They're a good source of plant protein and fiber, plus about 90% of the fats found in pistachios are unsaturated, for a trio of nutrients that may help keep you fuller longer," Bannan says. "In addition, in-shell pistachios may help you fool yourself into feeling full because the leftover shells can be a visual cue for portions, potentially helping to curb intake."

WATERMELON

This sweet fruit has a high water content, making it both hydrating and filling. It's a great source of hydration, which is key for weight loss, and the tasty treat is a clever alternative if you're not a big fan of drinking water. "Chop up watermelon ahead of time or purchase pre-chopped watermelon to make it quick, easy and convenient to enjoy throughout the week," Bannan says.



22

23

SALSA

Even if you're not having Mexican food, topping a lean protein with salsa instead of ketchup is a wise, diet-friendly option. Tomatoes are a great add-on to any dish as they're packed with fiber, vitamin C and immune-boosting lycopene—plus they deliver a powerful punch of flavor. Opt for homemade salsa since it's fresh, isn't processed and has less sugar than a store-bought brand. "Salsa is a low-calorie condiment that can easily spice up tacos, scrambled eggs or be used as a salad dressing alternative," Bannan says.



24

OLIVE OIL

A staple in the Mediterranean diet, olives and olive oil offer monounsaturated fats for heart and brain health. "Healthy fats can also help with weight loss by creating a feeling of fullness and helping the body absorb fat-soluble nutrients for optimal nutrition," Bannan says. Use olive oil in a homemade vinaigrette or when sautéing veggies. "I toss my vinaigrette with baby mixed greens, fresh herbs (such as chopped mint or dill), some shaved pecorino or Parmesan cheese and chopped walnuts," she says.



25

LEAN PROTEIN

Lean meat options such as skinless chicken, turkey, pork loin and grass-fed lean beef can help you manage your weight by giving your body the high levels of protein, vitamins and minerals it needs to keep your metabolism humming along, says registered dietitian nutritionist Mary Kate Keyes, a clinical instructor and the director of nutrition and wellness for MindFirst, a holistic health app. It may even help us sleep better. "Hunger may keep you from getting the sleep you need," she says. "There's some evidence that getting enough protein can help you catch those zzz's and it's even better when that protein is from the amino acid tryptophan, found in turkey."



[CHAPTER 4]

LIVING AT YOUR HAPPY WEIGHT

Find out what your day-to-day routine should look like to reach and maintain a healthy physique, plus how five people did just that.



*Adopting good-for-you
habits outside of the
kitchen can go far toward
helping you lose.*



Exercise provides numerous behind-the-scenes benefits that will support your weight loss journey.

WHY EXERCISE MATTERS

(EVEN IF IT'S NOT THE KEY TO SLIMMING DOWN)

Working out regularly is a critical part of any sustainable weight loss regimen, but not for the reasons you may think. Find the optimal approach to fitness that will help you meet your goals. BY ALYSSA SYBERTZ AND JAMIE DUCHARME

There have been thousands of words spent in the preceding pages of this magazine debunking the idea that you need to “eat less” in order to lose weight. But what about the advice to “exercise more”? While incorporating more exercise into your weekly or daily routines can certainly be a boon for your health—it’s been shown to improve your brain and heart health, strengthen your bones, boost energy and reduce your risk of disease—it isn’t going to exactly correlate to a speedy shedding of pounds. One 2018 study found that the minimum guidelines for physical activity—150 minutes of moderate activity per week—is not enough to

produce any significant weight loss on its own, while other reviews have shown a minimal difference in pounds lost when regular exercise was combined with diet.

WHEN WORKING OUT FALLS SHORT

So what gives? “There are two important factors that can explain why exercise alone is not the solution for long-term fat loss,” says exercise scientist Jamie Costello, the vice president of fitness at the Pritikin Longevity Center and Spa in Miami. The first has to do with calorie burn. “In a given day where someone exercises, it is still only 10% to 20% of

the total calories burned for the day,” says Costello. The rest comes from the normal activities you complete throughout your day, everything from walking to sleeping to digesting. So for your workout session to make a significant dent, you’d likely lose count of your reps, Costello says. “The amount of effort and duration necessary each day just from exercise would become a job unto itself.”

If you do commit to putting in that hardcore work in the gym, it could backfire in the kitchen. “If an exerciser does commit to 60-90 minutes a day of intense exercise, the body will crave additional calories, which will negate

most if not all of the hard work put in to burning it off,” says Costello. “Hunger is an unfortunate consequence for achieving the amount of work necessary to really move the needle.” It’s hunger that you shouldn’t ignore either, as post-workout fuel is critical to maintaining the lean muscle mass that’s going to give you visible definition and maintain your metabolism. “You want to keep and increase your muscle and bone mass while you lose body fat,” explains Costello, adding that he encourages people to think about fat loss, which is measured in inches, as opposed to weight loss, which is measured in pounds. “Other elements of our total body weight can artificially manipulate the scale (think of water weight), but inches tell the truth.”

The fact that exercise does not make an immediate impact on the number you see on the scale can take a mental toll that may hinder your ability to lose weight. “For a lot of people, exercise is

not enjoyable. They become focused on the perceived end result instead of the journey itself,” says Costello. “If your only motivation for exercising is the promise of quickly losing weight, it will become a disheartening experience.” A 2019 survey of 2,000 Americans found that the top three reasons they don’t exercise more were not having time (42% of respondents), not having the motivation (35%), and simply not enjoying exercise (25%). Add in the fact that you likely won’t see immediate results and it can be hard for someone who has never exercised regularly to make it a habit.

HOW MOVEMENT CAN MOVE THE NEEDLE

While exercise won’t be the thing that instantly helps you drop a jeans size or two, it is a critical supporting player in your weight loss journey. “Studies have shown that exercise is the biggest factor for keeping weight off long term,” says

Costello. The reason: It offers behind-the-scenes benefits in your body that help you adopt and maintain the healthy habits that power sustainable weight loss. “Humans were made to move. We are at our best when we regularly move and there are immediate benefits physically and psychologically that occur during and after a great exercise session,” Costello notes.

Among those physical benefits is an increase in metabolism that occurs during your workout and can last for hours afterward. “Immediately after exercise there is a state called EPOC (excess post-exercise oxygen consumption), which causes the body to burn more calories for minutes to hours after the workout based on the duration and intensity of the exercise,” explains Costello. Indeed, a 2021 study published in the *European Journal of Applied Physiology* found that high-intensity interval training improved metabolism during and after exercise after eight weeks. And if you maintain a consistent exercise regimen, this can also translate to a longer lasting change in metabolism. “The long-term metabolic influence is increasing the body’s homeostasis or set point of the RMR (resting metabolic rate),” Costello says. “While metabolism is mainly influenced by genetics, there is an opportunity to improve your RMR through improving the conditioning and amount of muscle through exercise.”

On the psychological side, regular exercise fosters a mindset that supports lasting weight loss. “Exercise can increase the motivation to stay on track for weight loss goals. Feeling better through movement versus being sedentary can influence the decisions made throughout the day,” notes Costello. The key to getting these perks, he adds, is choosing a workout you actually think is fun. “Long-term exercisers have learned to enjoy the activity itself or correlate its benefits



Forms of exercise that are done with others, such as team sports that occur at pre-appointed times, can be more fun and increase adherence.



HIIT Training



Yoga



Resistance Training

3 Workouts That Will Help Support Weight Loss

Even though the calorie burn you experience during a sweat session may not directly drive down your weight, there are many forms of exercise that can play a key role in your new healthy routine. Here, three workouts and how to get started:

TO BOOST METABOLISM **HIIT Training**

The short, all-out bursts of effort in high-intensity interval training provide an instant metabolism boost that continues to support fat burning for hours after your workout. Plus, you

can get the benefits from just a few minutes of work. **Quickie Routine** After a 3-minute warmup, complete a circuit of 45 seconds on, 15 seconds off of high knees, squat jumps, mountain climbers and punches. Repeat all four moves a second time.

TO EASE STRESS **Yoga**

Chronic stress can trap you in a cycle that facilitates fat storage and makes it difficult to trim inches. According to a 2021 study published in *Stress & Health*, regular

yoga practice decreases levels of perceived stress, plus increases feelings of mindfulness, spiritual well-being and self-control, all of which contribute to tamping down the fat-storing effects of stress. **Quickie Routine** Start with deep breathing in a seated position. At your own pace, move through cat/cow, downward-facing dog, warrior two and triangle pose; repeat on opposite side.

TO BUILD MUSCLE
Resistance Training Resistance or strength training is critical to

building the lean muscle mass that keeps your metabolism humming, especially as you get older. It's also the best way to sculpt the shape of your body, improve balance and build the functional strength required to carry out everyday tasks. **Quickie Routine** After a 3-minute warmup, hold medium-size dumbbells and complete 15 reps each of alternating reverse lunges, dumbbell thrusters, side lunges and biceps curls. Repeat all four moves a second time.

A regular workout routine does your body—and your mindset—good.



for improvements in health and recreational activities. The acclaimed runner's high is a release of endorphins the body provides as a natural reward to movement. We just have to stop and reflect to recognize and appreciate how good it feels."

According to a study published in the *International Journal of Obesity*, starting an exercise regimen may also inspire you to eat more healthfully. "It's hard to start a diet. Most people feel deprived from the get-go," says study co-author Molly Bray, chair of the department of nutritional sciences at the University of Texas at Austin. "Instead of taking something away, you can add physical activity to your life, and the consequent changes may lead to significant changes in the way you eat."

For the study, researchers recruited more than 2,500 college students who said they didn't diet and exercised for less than 30 minutes a week. The students were put on a 15-week aerobic exercise plan that involved doing guided cardio for 30-60 minutes, three

'LONG-TERM EXERCISERS HAVE LEARNED TO ENJOY THE ACTIVITY ITSELF. WE JUST HAVE TO STOP AND APPRECIATE HOW GOOD IT FEELS.'

—Jamie Costello, MSC

times a week. Each person was asked to fill out a diet questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study. They were told not to change their eating habits. But many of them did anyway. About 2,000 stuck with the exercise plan, and they were more likely than those who didn't to eat healthier



Exercising outdoors in nature offers a double dose of stress-reducing benefits that will help support fat burning.

without being told to, the researchers found. Many of the exercisers started eating more nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables, lean meats, fish and nuts, and fewer fried foods, soda and snack foods. The more—and more vigorously—a person exercised, the more their diet tended to improve, the researchers found.

Longer exercise duration was associated with a decrease in preference for foods characteristic of the standard Western diet, such as red meat, fried foods and snack foods. Meanwhile, high-intensity exercise was associated with an increase in preference for healthy foods. Overall, Bray says, this means "compliance with the exercise program was associated with a move toward eating healthier overall."

The study didn't look at why working out seemed to spur healthy eating, Bray says, but psychology and biology are likely both responsible. "There's a lot of research that positive results fuel adherence and persistence. Some

people may be saying, 'Wow, look, my shorts feel looser. I'm going to work on my eating behavior.'" But Bray says she doesn't think conscious effort can explain the whole phenomenon. Plenty of research suggests that exercise can change brain function, and she notes this rewiring may be behind the urge to eat more healthfully. "I really do think exercise is altering neural processing in your brain. The stimulation of your brain that occurs with high-intensity exercise is what changes lots of things about your body," including what it wants to eat, Bray says.

The best part about these weight loss-supporting benefits of exercise? People probably find it easier to start an exercise routine than a restrictive diet. "Add something to your life—what a good health message," Bray says. "This is a gift you're giving yourself, and other really significant health changes can occur along the way."

5 WAYS SLEEP CAN HELP YOU SHED POUNDS

Getting a full night's rest really can influence the number on the scale. Here's how. BY ALEXANDRA SIFFERLIN

By now, you've learned a thing or two about what foods to avoid, which ingredients and eating strategies can help and the most intelligent ways to approach exercise if you're looking to lose weight. But a growing body of evidence suggests that getting a good night's sleep should be on—or at least near—the top of this list.

Few experts would disagree with the idea that we've become a nation in need of a pick-me-up. We stay up too late, we wake up too early and, increasingly, we're overweight. While there's plenty of data showing that poor sleep can lead to weight gain and possibly even obesity, some new research shows that the opposite may

also be true: Having the right amount of good quality sleep may actually help you shed a few pounds.

"Getting a full night of sleep is one of the most underappreciated factors contributing to healthy weight maintenance," says Dr. Matthew Walker, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies the effect of sleep on weight.

Like all weight loss strategies, sleep is not a quick fix, but consistently clocking a quality night's slumber could be the secret sauce for your weight loss plan. To get the perks, keep the following lessons in mind to help optimize your sleep schedule for a more favorable number on the scale.





It may be far from your kitchen, but what you do in your bedroom is just as important to your weight loss journey.

1. IT CAN REDUCE YOUR CRAVINGS FOR UNHEALTHY FOOD

It takes a lot of willpower to order a salad over a pizza, and research shows that how much sleep you've gotten can make or break your resolve. In a small but intriguing study published in the journal *Nature Communications*, Walker and his research team put 23 healthy, nonobese men and women through two sleep-related tests. In the first experiment, the men and women got a full eight hours of sleep, and in the second they were sleep-deprived for one night. The following day, they were placed in a brain scanner and asked to rate how desirable certain foods were to them, from a piece of fruit to things such as ice cream. After a full night of rest, the people in the study tended to prefer healthier foods. But when they were sleep-deprived, the same men and women not only craved more junk food, but the area of their brains in charge of making rational decisions—such as healthy food choices—was inhibited. Overall, the sleep-deprived people wanted foods that contained on average 600 calories more than what they craved when they were well rested.

“We are finding that getting a full night of sufficient sleep actually helps you reboot and refresh the circuits of the human brain, allowing it to make optimal food choices,” says Walker. “These food choices may put you on a path toward weight control, rather than weight gain.”

2. IT CAN HELP YOU FEEL FULLER, LONGER

Getting a good night's rest not only helps you fight the urge to reach for a bag of chips, but it also keeps your hunger pangs in check. Take a study of 1,024 volunteers that showed that when people didn't get enough sleep, their hormone levels became

unbalanced. Their levels of the hormone leptin, which is responsible for feeling full, dropped, and the levels of the appetite-inducing hormone ghrelin went up. Researchers think sleep helps our bodies keep those hunger hormones in line, making sure we feel hungry only when we should.

Getting sufficient sleep not only tamps down your biochemical urges to eat, but it also helps you eat less overall. In a 2022 study conducted at the UChicago Sleep Center at UChicago Medicine, researchers found that when participants extended their sleep time from six-and-a-half hours per night to seven-and-a-half hours per night they consumed an average of 270 fewer calories per day without

‘WE ARE FINDING THAT GETTING A FULL NIGHT OF SUFFICIENT SLEEP ACTUALLY HELPS YOU REBOOT AND REFRESH THE CIRCUITS OF THE HUMAN BRAIN, ALLOWING IT TO MAKE MORE OPTIMAL FOOD CHOICES.’

—Matthew Walker, PhD

making any other diet or lifestyle changes. “This was not a weight loss study,” says Dr. Esra Tasali, director of the UChicago Sleep Center and lead author of the study. “But even within just two weeks, we have quantified evidence showing a decrease in caloric intake and a negative energy balance—[where] caloric intake is less than calories burned. If healthy sleep habits are maintained over longer duration,

this would lead to clinically important weight loss over time.”

3. IT MAKES YOU MORE LIKELY TO STICK TO YOUR DIET

Charles Elder, a researcher at the Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research, recruited 472 obese adults into a weight loss program that included weekly group meetings and counseling on diet and exercise. Elder and his colleagues measured a variety of factors, including levels of sleep, stress and depression. “At the beginning of the study, the people who told us they were sleeping six to eight hours a night ended up doing better in the weight loss program than those who were sleeping less than six or more than eight hours,” says Elder. Stress mattered too. People who had low stress and were sleeping more than six but no more than eight hours a night were about twice as likely to have success in the program as those who had higher baseline stress and who were sleeping too much or too little.

Elder's research isn't alone in making this connection. A 2019 study in the *International Journal of Obesity* found that overweight people who had less consistent sleep schedules and shorter sleep duration lost less weight than those who didn't have any sleep problems.

4. YOU'RE MORE LIKELY TO EXERCISE

“Losing weight takes a lot of energy, and if you are sleeping too much it's going to impact your energy level,” Elder says. “Meanwhile, sleeping too little can have effects on your ability to focus and concentrate on all the tasks at hand.” And though he can't say for sure, Elder believes that one of the main reasons getting enough sleep is linked to successful weight loss is that it provides you with the drive you need to stick to your goals. Other research

has shown that people who are sleepy often say they exercise less, opting instead for sedentary activities such as watching TV.

5. SLEEP LEADS TO BETTER CALORIE BURN

While you sleep, you're likely to burn somewhere between 50 and 100 calories an hour. According to Walker, "When you dream, your brain can be as—if not more—active than when you're awake." Experts are now learning that getting the right amount of sleep encourages a healthy metabolism and skimping on sleep—or spending too many hours in bed—throws it out of whack. According to a 2021 study from China, people who got too little sleep or too much sleep had a higher risk of metabolic syndrome, obesity and high blood pressure, while those who didn't get enough sleep also had an increased risk of high blood sugar.

Environment can also play a part. Research has shown that sleeping in cooler temperatures can stimulate a type of fat called brown fat, which burns more calories and has been shown to improve insulin sensitivity. In a study published in the journal *Diabetes*, a group of healthy men spent a month sleeping in a 66-degree room. After just one chilly month, the men had a 42% increase in brown fat and a 10% increase in metabolic fat activity. Sleeping in a cool room may sound like an easy fix, but it's no cakewalk. Simply turning up the AC and wrapping up in a blanket doesn't count. The researchers suspect the act of shivering is one of the primary drivers of the effect, so you have to really feel the chill, at least at first. Eventually, the brown fat your body has created will take over the heat-producing role of shivering, which you will experience as simply getting used to the temperature of the room.

Subsequent studies have confirmed these effects of cold temperatures



Research has found that both sleeping too much and not sleeping enough can hinder your ability to lose weight.

on brown fat. In a 2019 study from Vanderbilt University Medical Center, researchers discovered that when participants were exposed to temperatures that felt cold but not chilly enough to induce shivering, the number of fat molecules present in their brown fat decreased. In other words, turning down the thermostat helped them spontaneously burn more fat.

No expert suggests that sleeping, without other behavioral modifications, will help you lose weight, but since many weight loss plans are hard to sustain, there's no harm in turning your attention to turning in for the night. After all, doing what's best for your metabolism while you rest may be just as important as what you do when you rise.

THE PERKS OF SLOWING DOWN YOUR EATING

Being fully present at mealtime can make dining more enjoyable, plus deliver impressive health benefits. Here's how. BY MARKHAM HEID AND ALYSSA SYBERTZ

Grab a raisin—just one raisin—and put it on a plate. Now, sit down and examine the raisin. Smell it. Roll it between your fingers. When you feel you've fully appreciated its raisin-ness, pop it into your mouth, and consider its taste and texture as you slowly chew and swallow it.

You've just dabbled in the trendy practice of mindful eating—a kind of meditation in motion that's increasingly being scientifically studied for its potential health benefits. Like other mindfulness methods, it emphasizes a judgment-free awareness of your thoughts, emotions and sensory experiences, and it helps you pay

attention to a task all of us do (several times a day) but seldom stop to notice.

Some experts believe that mindful eating helps attune practitioners to many parts of the body and can therefore have benefits from the brain to the gut. Mindful eating can help connect you to your body's built-in hunger and fullness cues—signals many of us miss when we're distracted by TV, phones or other external stimuli, says Megrette Fletcher, a registered dietitian, co-founder of the nonprofit Center for Mindful Eating and author of five books on the subject. It can also help you make better food choices. "The key benefit of mindful eating

is it is a sustainable approach to dietary change," she explains. Here's how mindful eating can help improve your diet and health.

IT MIGHT HELP YOU EAT LESS

One review of 24 studies, published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, found evidence that "attentive eating" helped people eat less during meals, while inattentive eating led people to eat more during a meal and also later on.

Eating while you're distracted seems to have effects even after you're full. A study of TV watchers



The practice helps you tune into your body's hunger cues and eliminates the distractions that cause overeating.

published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* found that the more engaged they were with a TV show, the more they tended to eat. This type of “mindless” eating can also prompt you to eat more later in the day. “Distraction reduces how much attention you allocate to what you are eating, and your memory for that eating experience will be less accurate and vivid,” says Eric Robinson, first author of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* review and a behavioral scientist at the University of Liverpool in the U.K. How well you remember your meal matters, Robinson says, because your

memory of what you’ve eaten seems to play an important role in regulating your appetite.

In a 2020 study from the University of Cambridge, researchers found that participants who wrote down all their memories of a recent meal ate less during a subsequent snack. Other research supports the idea that the degree of hunger you feel is dictated in part by your conscious awareness and the quality of your working and episodic memory—not just by how much food you’ve consumed. By strengthening your memory for what you’ve consumed, mindful eating may ultimately help

control your appetite—and, by extension, your intake.

Of course, journaling itself may play a role in weight loss. “Whether it’s accountability or because we skip high-calorie food due to the pain of having to ledger it, loggers do tend to lose weight,” notes registered dietitian Mary Kate Keyes. But beyond simply recording calories and macronutrients, it can also be helpful to consider the “why” behind what you are eating. “I encourage clients who are compelled to ‘bite what they write’ to go beyond simply listing their calories to add a little reflection on why they are choosing certain foods at certain times,”

What About Intuitive Eating?

A similar but separate practice, the popularity of intuitive eating has risen in recent years. While it also involves physically and emotionally tuning in to eating and the food you're consuming in order to cultivate a healthier and happier relationship with food, there are other key characteristics that separate intuitive eating from mindful eating. Writing on [IntuitiveEating.org](https://www.intuitiveeating.org), the creators explain that the second key principle involves “removing the obstacles and disrupters to attunement, which usually come from the mind in the form of rules, beliefs and thoughts.” This is achieved by giving yourself unconditional permission to eat any foods you like, along with silencing the voice in your head that says certain foods or choices are good and others are bad. Instead, the object is to focus on the choices that satisfy your physical hunger and your emotional needs, with the goal of improving body image and effortlessly making healthier choices—effects that have been backed by science. In one 2022 study from Utah State University, adaptation of intuitive eating practices resulted in a significant decrease in symptom severity among people with eating disorders.

The practice of intuitive eating has not been linked to weight loss directly. However, many of the issues it seeks to resolve, such as overreliance on “quick fix” diets, emotional eating and feeling guilty about satisfying your cravings, may be standing in the way of people trying to lose weight. If they were to get rid of these roadblocks with intuitive eating, the scale might start trending downward.



Intuitive eating encourages giving yourself permission to have the foods that satisfy you.

Keyes says. “This can really help you go even deeper and reflect on what’s truly driving you to lose weight.”

IT CAN CUT DOWN ON CRAVINGS

“Training in mindful eating may break the link between experiencing a food craving and indulging it,” says Dr. Ashley Mason, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco. “If we are mindful of our food craving—and mindful of how we feel after taking one bite, say, of a piece of chocolate cake—we might find fewer bites satisfying.” Mason’s research supports this notion. In a study she co-authored in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, Mason found that when people practiced mindful eating, they ate less in response to their cravings, and this had a small but measurable effect on their weight.

Another aspect of mindful eating—its emphasis on awareness of thoughts and emotions and where they come from—could promote healthier mealtime habits by helping people tune in to their bodies. “We might realize that our food cravings are actually indicating something else,” Mason says. “Maybe we are stressed, tired or otherwise uncomfortable in some way that would be better served by an adaptive behavior that doesn’t involve eating,” such as getting some exercise or taking a nap.

IT MAY BENEFIT YOUR GUT

Paying attention to what’s on your plate may make for a healthier gut—and not just because you may be eating less. Some mindful eating proponents say the practice encourages people to chew and savor their food more, slowing down the pace of a meal. Research has found that slow eating (and lots of chewing)

helps trigger the release of gut hormones that aid digestion.

A study published in the *Journal of Crohn's and Colitis* found that mindfulness practices can reduce symptoms in patients with inflammatory bowel disease—most likely by relieving stress, which is an established trigger of symptoms. Other studies have found that mindful eating may help people with type 2 diabetes by easing blood sugar spikes and improving diet quality.

All that said, there's no direct link between the practice and weight loss. "The research regarding mindful eating and weight loss is not clear," Fletcher says. Some studies show an edge for using mindful eating as a weight loss

'IF YOU'VE EVER BEEN WINE TASTING, YOU WILL BE FAMILIAR WITH THE MINDFUL APPROACH. WHAT IF WE APPLIED THIS TO OUR COFFEE EVERY MORNING?'

—Joey Hulin, meditation teacher

tool, while others find none. "We don't know how much attention is required, or whether it's possible to train people to eat more attentively in order to eat less and lose weight," Robinson says. It's also not yet known how much distraction is too much—or whether some types (such as eating while answering email) are more diverting than others (such as eating with friends), he says.

More research is needed. What is already clear, however, is that being distracted while you eat could lead to eating more overall—and that the promising benefits of mindful eating are worth paying attention to.



Using all five senses while consuming your food will help you be more mindful.

3 Ways to Practice Mindfulness at Mealtimes

To get started with mindful eating, try these tips from meditation teacher Joey Hulin, author of *Mind & Bowl: A Guide to Mindful Eating & Cooking*.

Turn Meals Into Tastings

"If you've ever been wine tasting, you will be familiar with the mindful approach to the experience," says Hulin. "What if we applied this same mindful approach to our first coffee every morning, or our dessert? To do so would be to practice being present and mindful while also letting ourselves savor, celebrate and truly enjoy our food." This approach involves considering your food or drink with all five senses—sight, sound, smell, feel and finally, taste—before relaxing to enjoy it.

Define Your Why

Before and while you're eating, Hulin suggests asking yourself why you have chosen to partake in that particular food or drink. Were

you craving that food or flavor? Did you choose it for the nutritional value? For the way it makes you feel? Understanding the answers to these questions will make your experience of eating more mindful.

Consider Where Your Food Came From

For many pros and practitioners in the mindfulness field, eating mindfully also involves thinking about and appreciating the journey your food took to get to your plate, plus how it was grown and produced. "Food isn't just fuel to keep these miraculous human bodies of ours functioning efficiently: It represents an intimate relationship between us and the earth," Hulin says. "The food we eat has an effect on our bodies and minds and, in turn, the choices we make have an effect on the planet and the producers, growers and communities who enable it."

MY SLOW AND STEADY JOURNEY

After decades of writing about how other people have slimmed down, this 54-year-old health and nutrition journalist decided to chart her own course. BY LAMBETH HOCHWALD

I never thought I'd write about my weight, especially since I've spent decades spotlighting many other women's incredible weight loss journeys for a long list of magazines.

Their dedication and commitment to shedding pounds wowed me and I would tuck their tips in the back of my head for when I was finally ready to follow in their footsteps. One of my favorite tips came from a woman who chopped an entire head of iceberg lettuce into a bowl every

night so she could mindlessly eat while watching Netflix. She told me this while casually mentioning she had lost 100 pounds on her own—without any medication or surgery.

Thing is, I knew exactly what I needed to do. But, since the half-hearted efforts I made to shed pounds never really stuck, I never saw the quantifiable results I hoped to see when I hopped on my scale.

I even joked with friends that I'd lose the baby weight eventually.

Joke's on me—my son just started college, which means I lost the weight right under the wire in the exact way every expert ever suggested doing it: slowly and steadily with a total of 1 pound a week, and with no signs I'll ever regain those 50 pounds back.

So how did I do it? Turns out, a life change can be instrumental. It also helps to find what works for you. I hope some of the five things I tried can help make a difference for others.

1

I GOT DIVORCED



I'm not recommending this across the board but, seriously, there's nothing like the end of a 20-year marriage to either drop you into nightly Ben & Jerry's binges or propel you to a personal reckoning. When one friend told me she thought I was heading down an unhealthy path, I listened. I focused. I thought all about the changes I needed to make. This huge shift in my life was what made me finally realize that my emotional eating had become a serious problem.

2

I RAN



I mean every. single. day. Even in the rain, sleet or snow. I don't even think about it anymore. I just lay out my running clothes every night and in the morning, after a quick sip of coffee, I'm ready to roll. When my friends asked to come along, I'd tell them I'm happy to meet them in the park. "It'll be fun," I'd say. When they heard I was outside in subzero temperatures at 5:45 a.m.? It was a hard pass. Not me. I went out to Central Park day after day. At first the runs were brutal and were more like a speedy walk. When I tried to pick up the pace, I could barely do 10 minutes without clutching my sides. But you know what? It's true what the experts say. It does get easier. Within three weeks I was able to sustain a comfortable jogging pace. Even now,

some days it's still hard but no one ever regrets going for a run when it's all done. PS: I'm now up to 14 miles a week and may even add some races to my routine in the near future.

3

I WROTE



And by writing, I wrote down every. single. thing I ate and drank. You don't need a fancy notebook, by the way, to jot things down. It became a game to see how foods were affecting me and what changes I should make. For example, pasta at night—even whole wheat—was a really bad idea when I hopped on the scale the next day. I also noticed that subbing a dried apricot really worked as a late-night sweet snack and, similarly, that olives give you sort of the same salt fix as Doritos, so I made those a regular side dish. I also filled my journal with encouraging words. Now, when I open my journal and I look back to the early days, I can proudly sense my excitement building as the pounds began to fall off.

4

I BECAME FRIENDS WITH MY SCALE

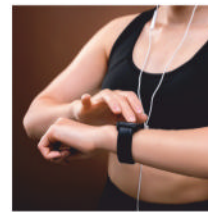


By now, I'm sure you're not surprised to learn that I weigh myself every. single. day. At first, it was really scary to see what I weighed. I've never been that focused on my

body, but I was ashamed that my weight had crept up and, at points, it seemed like my weight was in a worse holding pattern than a plane trying to land at JFK airport. To get past it, I wrote messages such as this one in my journal: "The scale ain't pretty but let's go!" I guess that was all the encouragement I needed because now I can't wait to step on that scale before I get ready for my run. If I'm up 1 or 2 pounds, I no longer worry because I view the week as an aggregate of pounds up and (hopefully) down. To recalibrate, I study my journal and adjust what I'm eating.

5

I TRACKED MY STEPS



I promise you don't need any fancy gadgets to do this besides my favorite, the Pacer app. Seeing how far I've walked or run at the end of each day—or if I've set a personal record—gives me a sense of satisfaction. I still walk as much as possible during the day and I'll keep doing my early morning Central Park reservoir runs. It's become my favorite part of the day, a chance to stream my favorite tunes and tune out while gazing at the historic architecture lining the park. Sure, I get a kick out of passing other runners, but I'm content with my own middle-age pace because I now know that cardio has been one of the keys to my downsizing. And isn't finding what works for you what losing weight is all about?

Inspired? Keep reading for more aspirational stories of weight loss success.



‘I GET TO LIVE MY BEST FOOD LIFE EVERY DAY.’

Tiffany McGee, 30, Clearwater, Florida
HIGHEST WEIGHT 230 pounds
CURRENT WEIGHT 150 pounds

Tiffany McGee sat in the doctor’s office in September 2021, staring at the functional medicine practitioner reviewing her lab work. “He told me I needed to do a Paleo diet and eat every two hours to keep my blood sugar up,” she recalls. “I started doing that and I gained 10 pounds in four days. I felt like I couldn’t go anywhere because I needed to snack all the time. I just wanted to cry. That was when I snapped.”

At the time, McGee was no stranger to losing weight and improving her health. From 2016 to 2018, she lost nearly 100 pounds, dropping to 137, using traditional weight loss strategies—eating chicken breasts and brown rice, exercising daily and cycling through different diets including dairy-free and gluten-free. She created a 21-day meal plan that she shared with her thousands of Instagram followers @myadventuretofit that also utilized these traditional methods and kept

the weight off for a few years, even having skin removal surgery.

Then in early 2021 she welcomed her third baby and things started to change. “I didn’t gain much weight with the baby, but after I had the baby I was gaining weight every single day,” shares McGee. “I didn’t know what was going on. I had the tools and it just wasn’t working anymore.” At the same time, McGee began having episodes of extreme low blood sugar, for which the only way to recover was to eat carbohydrates. “I went through a whole bunch of doctors and spent thousands of dollars,” she recalls. But instead of a cure, she was given loads of supplements to take and different diets to try. By the time she saw the functional medicine doctor who told her to eat every two hours, her weight had ballooned back to 192 pounds.

Finally, McGee was diagnosed with reactive hypoglycemia, a condition in which blood sugar bottoms out in the hours after a meal, causing symptoms such as cognitive issues, blurred vision, hunger and fatigue. In her research into the condition, she

was reading advice to eat every two hours and always have candy close by, which didn’t seem healthy to her, so she kept looking. “Every so often, I saw people say that the only way you can cure reactive hypoglycemia is with a low carb ketogenic diet. That if you want to do low carb, you have to do keto so you have stable energy,” McGee says. “That was the part I never understood, that you have to substitute the fat for the carbs.” Still, she was hesitant, so her husband offered to try a keto diet first. “He had gained 40 pounds with me and wasn’t losing any weight either,” she recalls. “Then he lost 10 pounds in three days and said it was the easiest thing he’d ever done.”

Convinced, McGee decided to try it. “I had about 10 blood sugar crashes the first day, then maybe two the next day, and I haven’t had one since then,” she says. “And each day my weight went down a little bit.” She ate steak cooked in butter and salt, Asian-style pork belly, bunless bacon cheeseburgers and Cobb salads, learning that she could prevent blood sugar crashes with the carbohydrates in vegetables instead of cake or doughnuts. She even incorporated intermittent fasting, eating just one large meal a day in order to reduce her high insulin levels. “The doctor said it takes six to eight months to heal from too much insulin, but I would say the last of my symptoms were gone by day 50.”

She also shed all the weight she’d gained postpartum and then some. “I was 157 pounds when I got pregnant and I’m 150 now,” shares McGee. “Before, in order to stay under 160 pounds, I would have to go into eating a boiled egg for breakfast and just starving. Now, I get to live my best food life every single day. I’m just trying to be in the best health I can possibly be.” —Alyssa Sybertz

‘I PUT ASIDE ALL MY EXCUSES.’

**Melissa Flaxington, 33,
Warwick, Rhode Island**

HIGHEST WEIGHT 350 pounds

CURRENT WEIGHT 130 pounds

Melissa Flaxington slunk back against her pillows, thinking about the family function she was missing. “I was severely depressed and I just couldn’t be around people,” she recalls. “By that point, at close to 400 pounds, I pretty much lived in my bed.” But this moment was different. Different from the first time she’d seen the number 300 on the scale at her doctor’s office, different from the time she couldn’t fit into the booth at a restaurant. “I decided in that moment that I was going to put aside all my excuses. I was fed up,” Flaxington says. “I didn’t know where I would be in six months or a year because my health was declining mentally and physically. I felt a spark inside of me ignite.”

Prior to that moment in 2020, Flaxington had tried countless diets and weight loss trends, failing when she didn’t have the fortitude to stay consistent. But this time she was determined, even purchasing a 24-day jump-start package that included supplements, meal replacements and meal plans. “I had never cooked before, but I started cooking my own meals, finding easy recipes with few ingredients that I could make.” She also got a fitness watch and set daily walking goals, starting at 6,000 steps. “I had to break it up because I couldn’t walk a whole mile at first, it was too painful,” shares Flaxington, who suffers from fibromyalgia.

By the end of the 24 days and having established a healthy routine,

Flaxington had the tools to keep going. “The fact that I completed it, that I did it consistently, felt really good.”

Next, knowing she needed a system to continue to hold her accountable, she decided to use WeightWatchers to track her food. “It’s a great tool. I didn’t cut out any food groups,” says Flaxington. “I did it for about six months.” After that she started tracking her macros and continuing to walk and exercise daily. She also used intermittent fasting for a stretch. “Moving my body has been something that’s non-negotiable,” she adds. “I have to do something every day.” In addition to walking, Flaxington added different forms of cardio as well as strength training. “I never went to the gym one time. I would walk back and forth in my backyard or in my house or I’d go up and down the stairs.” She also continued cooking, favoring simple, nutrient-rich meals such as quiche with vegetables, chicken meatballs and vegetable stir-fry.

While she stopped weighing herself because an obsession with the scale was hindering her progress, she could

‘I LEARNED TO PUT MYSELF FIRST. THE MENTAL BENEFITS I’VE GOTTEN HAVE TRANSFORMED MY ENTIRE LIFE.’

—Melissa Flaxington

tell from how her clothes were fitting that things were changing fast. “I started at a 3X and I kept dropping sizes. I was able to shop in the regular clothes instead of the plus-size department,” Flaxington says. But more important than the physical transformation was the mental one. “I have a new mindset, I’m ambitious and I have goals,” she shares. “I learned to put myself first. The mental benefits I’ve gotten have transformed my entire life.”

After sharing her journey on Instagram @inspireyourfirefitness, Flaxington recently got her personal trainer certification and is excited to start helping others transform their lives. “The other day, I took my nephew to the aquarium and we walked around for over an hour. I never would have been able to do that two years ago,” she shares. “I feel free in my body to do anything I want to do or try.” —A.S.



BEFORE



AFTER

'I BELIEVE IN MYSELF'

Zachary Aldrich, 32,
Tarpon Springs, Florida
HIGHEST WEIGHT 330 pounds
CURRENT WEIGHT 225 pounds

Zachary Aldrich tears up every time he recalls the most meaningful hug he ever received—when his 7-year-old daughter embraced him and shouted delightedly, “Daddy, I can fit my arms all the way around you!”

Before that, Aldrich had struggled playing with her and his younger son. “I can’t get around your big fat tummy,” his daughter would say to him in exasperation.

“She wasn’t being malicious,” Aldrich says, “She was frustrated, like, ‘get out of my way.’ But it really affected me.”

He consulted his doctor and tried a few apps and weight loss programs such as Noom and WeightWatchers, with no sustainable success. “I’d hit a friction point, didn’t know what to do, and I’d stop,” he recalls. Then, he found SwitchOn Coaching, a weight loss and lifestyle program near his home in central Florida, run by Dr. Rhadi Ferguson, a former Olympic athlete, and Arlo Henderson, who is head coach of the Tampa Bay Inferno women’s football team.

A former high school athlete, Aldrich was all in on the concept of being coached. “When a coach speaks, you listen,” he says. The work started with disciplined food practices: using a kitchen scale to carefully weigh portions of coach-prescribed meals and snacks; sharing daily weigh-ins with the coaches; taping a printout of each week’s meal plan to the kitchen cabinets. Aldrich brought containers of his planned meals to work, social

events, family holiday celebrations and even restaurants—tolerating some odd looks and the occasional discouraging comment in the process.

Weekly calls with Ferguson or Henderson gave Aldrich the opportunity to talk through “friction points” such as slipups or upcoming food-based festivities. They’d also celebrate progress and map out next steps. The calls gave him the accountability and consistency he needed to keep going. “We were essentially rewiring my brain throughout the program,” he says. “I knew what was expected of me.”

Indeed, the most life-changing aspect of the program, according to Aldrich, was its focus on recalibrating his thoughts, feelings and behaviors around food. He looked back on his life through a new lens, thinking about what it meant that he had identified himself as “a big dude, the biggest and tallest kid” for as long as he could remember. He came to notice what foods he reached for first when he was hungry, tired, frustrated or happy. And he worked to understand and shift his response to stress, learning



‘WE WERE ESSENTIALLY REWIRING MY BRAIN.... I REALIZED THAT I RESPONDED TO BOTH “WOW, YOU DID AWESOME” AND “YOU’RE UPSET RIGHT NOW” WITH “LET’S GET AN ICE CREAM AND TALK.”’

—Zachary Aldrich

to process what was happening before he reacted in ways that might include emotional eating. He realized that he was accustomed to responding to both “Wow, you did awesome!” and “Oh, you’re upset right now” in the same way: “Let’s get an ice cream and talk about it.” This was a game changer for Aldrich. He realized, “weight is more than just physical, it’s an emotional issue.” Over the course of the yearlong SwitchOn program, Aldrich went from 330 pounds to 225.

Aldrich’s weight loss success became just one area of his life in which his confidence soared. He learned that he could set a goal, take incremental steps toward achieving it and improve his life as a result. After asking for but not receiving a raise at the company where he worked as a logistics professional, he completed an additional certification course and got a new job that significantly increased his salary. He connects his professional success to what he learned from the weight loss coaching process.

“A lot of it had to do with the confidence I gained from it,” he says. And at this point in his life, he can say with certainty, “I believe in myself.” —Holly Lebowitz Rossi



'KETO HAS SAVED MY LIFE.'

Jessica Russo, 46,
Staten Island, New York
HIGHEST WEIGHT 289 pounds
CURRENT WEIGHT 198 pounds

Jessica Russo had spent years watching Oprah talk about “aha moments” without ever having one of her own. Instead, she’d gone nearly 20 years watching her weight yo-yo up and down as she tried diet after diet and trend after trend. “My son is 19 and my daughter is 17. My weight problem has been since I had them,” shares Russo. “I would gain 20 pounds, then lose 30, then gain 40. And on and on and on.”

A few years ago, when her weight had peaked at 289 pounds, Russo was talking to her best friend. “I was feeling so defeated and hopeless, like I was going to be stuck there. And she said, ‘no you’re not, you’re going to lose it.’ She was so confident.” That was when Russo had one of those moments she’d heard so

much about. “I thought, ‘so what if I lose 50 pounds and then gain it again. I’ll lose it again. I’m not giving up,’” she recalls. “It was so freeing and empowering.”

It was a good thing Russo adopted this confident mindset, as things did not go as planned when she started out. “About a month into my journey I was getting terrible pains in my stomach. It turned out I had a perforated colon and diverticulitis. I had to get a colon resection,” she shares. “I had lost almost 15 pounds already and it was a dead stop to recover.” After she was able to start again, in January 2020, she made it down to around 220 pounds when the weight started to creep back on. Afraid of things spiraling out of control, she signed up for coaching with an inspirational trainer she followed on Instagram. “I was so sure she would help me, but it wasn’t the right fit,” says Russo. “I felt really low.”

That was when someone else she follows on Instagram started doing the keto diet, an approach Russo had never tried in the past. “It seemed very gimmicky,” she says. But she began to read more of the research on the plan and decided to try it, losing 10 pounds in the first week. When her weight loss stalled after that, she tried to figure out what was wrong. “I was seeing benefits from keto,” Russo recalls. “I wasn’t hungry and I was feeling better. I knew I needed to make it happen.”

Deciding to pursue a coach again, Russo began working with Maria Emmerich, the bestselling author of numerous keto cookbooks. “And that was it. It completely changed my life,” she says. In addition to sugar, Russo gave up coffee, dairy, nuts and seeds and the scale began to move. But even more importantly, she felt her body taking over, changing the signals it was sending her. “In the past, I was constantly craving stuff and having the need to give into the cravings. Then that would spiral into something bigger,” she says. “With keto, your body is taking over. It’s not starving all the time and it doesn’t need sugar.”

Eleven months into her keto journey, Russo is down over 90 pounds and continues to lose. She’s sleeping more deeply, has loads more energy and her chronic pain has vanished. “I used to step out of bed in the morning and my feet and ankles would just hurt. I had constant headaches and pain in my back and my calves. Now everything is just gone.” She shares her journey on Instagram, @jessdoinketo, and is currently taking Emmerich’s training program to become a coach herself. As for her journey, there’s no going back. “I wish I would have found this 10 or 15 years ago. I had so many years of my weight taking away from my life,” says Russo. “I feel like keto has saved my life.” —A.S.

THE GUIDE TO WEIGHT LOSS

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*Forget crash diets:
For healthy weight
goals, choose a variety
of fresh whole foods.*