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10 Slim-Down Strategies You Can Count On

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Toss the calorie calculator. When it comes to weight loss, here are the numbers that matter.

The devil is in the details—and nowhere is the cliché truer than with weight loss. It's the small decisions that add up to change, and that's a good thing, says William Dietz, MD, PhD, at the CDC: "If you can count it, you can change it." The 10 countable steps that follow will add up to victory over unwanted pounds. But don't try them all at once. "It's like renovating a house; most people do better taking one room at a time," says John Jakicic, PhD, director of weight management at the University of Pittsburgh. "Start with the easiest tactic. Once you master it, move on."

Strategy #1

Weigh yourself 1 time per day

Why It Works: Weekly weigh-ins are a staple of many popular diet programs, but studies now show that *daily* weighing is the key to lasting loss. When researchers at the University of Minnesota monitored the scale habits of 1,800 dieting adults, they found that those who stepped on every day lost an average of 12 pounds over 2 years (weekly scale watchers lost only 6) and were less likely to regain lost weight. The reason: "The more often you monitor your results, the quicker you can catch the behavioral slip that causes weight gain," says Jakicic.

Who It Helped: Heidi Hertz, 29, of Los Angeles. "I was in denial about my size, so I never used a scale. When I started weighing daily, I lost 7 pounds in 2 weeks. I loved the immediate gratification, and eventually lost 77 pounds."

Add It In: Step on the scale first thing every morning, when you weigh the least. Expect small day-to-day fluctuations because of bloating or dehydration, but if your weight creeps up by 2% (that's just 3 pounds if you weigh 150); it's time to pass up the bread.

Strategy #2

Watch no more than 2 hours of TV a day

Why It Works: TV junkies miss out on calorie-burning activities like backyard tag with the kids; instead, they become sitting ducks for junk-food ads. One recent study found that adults who watch more than 2 hours of TV per day take in 7% more calories and consume more sugary snacks than those who watch less than an hour a day.

Who It Helped: Christy Taylor, 27, of Sylacauga, AL. "TV was one reason I weighed 220 pounds. I watched it constantly. My blood pressure skyrocketed during pregnancy, and when it didn't come down after my son was born, I decided to try to limit myself to one show a day. That was 10 months ago, and I've since lost 32 pounds."

Add It In: Wean yourself off the tube by introducing other activities into your life. Eliminate the temptation to watch between-show filler by recording your must-see programs so you can fast-forward through the ads. Or subscribe to a mail-order DVD service like Netflix, and make a movie the only thing you watch all day.

Strategy #3

Contact a friend 3 times per week

Why It Works: "Long-term weight loss requires support," says Marion Franz, RD, a nutrition consultant in Minneapolis. Her study review found that people who met regularly with a dietitian or attended groups like Weight Watchers were more likely to maintain their losses than those who didn't.

Who It Helped: Maggie Ramos, 39, of Houston. "When I plateaued for months, my friend Nancy stepped in and cheered me on until I lost it all."

Add It In: If you can't attend group meetings, announce your weight loss intentions so friends can support you, says Franz. And add a dieter pal to your regular call or e-mail list, too.

Strategy #4

Eat 4 g of fiber in every meal or snack

Why It Works: A high-fiber diet can lower your caloric intake without making you feel deprived. In a recent Tufts University study, women who ate 13 g of fiber or less per day were five times as likely to be overweight as those who ate more fiber. Experts see a number of mechanisms through which fiber promotes weight loss: It may slow down eating because it requires more chewing, speed the passage of food through the digestive tract, and boost satiety hormones.

Who It Helped: Monique Hester, 41, of North Richland Hills, TX. "I started a diet that had me consuming more than 25 g of fiber daily, and before I knew it, I'd lost 23 pounds. I don't even like white bread anymore. I want something I can crunch and chew."

Add It In: To get 25 g of fiber a day, make sure you eat six meals or snacks, each of which contains about 4 g of fiber. For instance, Hester started her day with grapes (1 cup = 1.4 g of fiber) and cracked wheat toast (two slices = 6 g) or oatmeal (1 cup = 4 g). She often had a cup of black bean soup for lunch (4.4 g) with a slice of cracked wheat bread. One good trick: For to-go snacks, buy fruit; it's handier than vegetables, so it's an easy way to up your fiber intake. For instance, one large apple has just as much fiber (5 g) as a cup of raw broccoli.

Strategy #5

Take 5 (thousand) extra steps a day

Why It Works: A typical person takes about 5,000 steps per day between going to work, running errands, and doing chores around the house. Doubling that number can have significant health benefits: higher "good" HDL cholesterol levels, lower blood

pressure, improved glucose control, and yes, a lower number on the scale. Walking more steps per day also leads to a lower percentage of body fat and slimmer waists and hips, reports a recent University of Tennessee study of 80 women. An earlier University of South Carolina study of 109 people showed that those who took fewer than 5,000 steps per day were, on average, heavier than people who took more than 9,000.

Who It Helped: Joanna Webb, 34, of Queen Creek, AZ. "I started walking when my daughter was 2 months old. I couldn't even make it around the block without stopping. I kept at it until I could walk 6 nights a week with my husband, our 5-year-old, and the baby. Now I've lost 35 pounds."

Add It In: Wear a pedometer to make sure you log your 5,000 extra steps, or aim for about 50 minutes of extra walking (2 1/2 miles) per day. In the Tennessee study, "Some of the women walked with friends; others increased their steps by taking the stairs and parking farther away," says lead researcher Dixie Thompson, PhD.

Strategy #6

Log it six days a week

Why It Works It Works: "Monitoring you're eating and exercise every day will let you know if you're reaching the 500-calorie daily deficit you need to lose about a pound a week," says Robert Carels, PhD, a psychology professor at Bowling Green State University. His study of 40 obese adults found that those who recorded their food and exercise over 6 months lost more than 20 pounds. That was nearly twice the amount shed by less consistent note takers.

Who It Helped: Julie Fugett, 29, of Lawrence, KS. "Journaling was an important part of my program. I chronicled food intake using the Weight Watchers Points system and also printed out a monthly calendar to schedule workouts in advance. I'd mark each successful day of exercise with a purple smiley face, and eventually those stick-on grins added up to a 25-pound weight loss that I've maintained for over 2 years."

Add It In: Carry a small notebook or PDA to record what you eat and use a pedometer to estimate the calories you burn. Although you should try to keep a daily log, it's realistic to give yourself a break one day a week and allow time off for holidays and houseguests. "Then get back on track," says Carels.

Strategy #7

Sleep 7 hours a night

Why It Works: A University of Chicago study found that people deprived of Zzzs had lower levels of the hormones that control appetite. "The research suggested that short sleep durations could be a risk factor for obesity," says James Gangwisch, PhD, an epidemiologist from Columbia University Medical Center. Sure enough, his follow-up study of 9,588 Americans found that women who slept 4 hours or less per night were 234% more likely to be obese.

Who It Helped: Julia Havey, 44, of St. Louis. "I used to stay up late watching movies and eating ice cream. I'd have to wake up at 6 AM, so I always felt exhausted and bloated. Now I make it a point to be in bed by 11 PM. The extra sleep makes it easier for me to stick to my diet and exercise routine because I have more energy and fewer cravings."

Add It In: The key number for most people is 7 hours or more a night, says Gangwisch, so set an early bedtime and stick to it.

Strategy #8

Drink 8 glasses of water per day

Why It Works: Water is not just a thirst quencher—it actually speeds the body's metabolism. Researchers in Germany found that drinking two 8-ounce glasses of cold water increased their subjects' metabolic rate by 30%, and the effect persisted for 90 minutes. One-third of the boost came from the body's efforts to warm the water, but the rest was due to the work the body did to absorb it. "When drinking water, no calories are ingested but calories are used, unlike when drinking sodas, where additional calories are ingested and possibly stored," explains the lead researcher, Michael Boschmann, MD, of University Medicine Berlin.

Who It Helped: Paige Tomas, 25, of Corpus Christi, TX. "I used to have a five-can-a-day Dr Pepper addiction. To stop, I'd make myself drink a whole glass of water before allowing myself a soda, and now I'm down to just two Diet Dr Peppers a day."

Add It In: Increasing water consumption to eight glasses per day may help you lose about 8 pounds in a year, says Boschmann, so try drinking a glass before meals and snacks and before consuming sweetened drinks or juices.

Strategy #9

After a 9-hour day (lunch included!), go home

Why It Works: A University of Helsinki study of 7,000 adults found that those who'd packed on pounds in the previous year were more likely to have logged overtime hours. Lack of time for diet and exercise is most likely the cause, but it's also possible that work stress has a direct effect on weight gain through changes in hormones like cortisol.

Who It Helped: Nicole Bruni, 36, of Milwaukee. "I gained about 35 pounds in my first year at my law firm, so I started making it a point to wrap up the day in time for a 6 PM Spinning class, and I've since lost 40 pounds."

Add It In: Set firm limits on your workday so that when you're done, you still have the oomph to take a bike ride and broil fish for dinner. To help you stay productive enough to finish on time, set an hourly alarm; when it goes off, deal with your most pressing duties.

Strategy #10

Shave 10 points off your glycemic load

Why It Works: Foods high on the glycemic index—including sugars and refined carbohydrates—cause blood sugar to spike. "The body uses insulin to bring down blood sugar," says Yunsheng Ma, MD, PhD, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. The body stores the excess sugar as fat. But that leaves blood sugar levels low, so we feel hungry again and eat more—an unhealthy cycle. Ma studied the eating patterns of 572 people and found that those who ate foods high on the glycemic index weighed significantly more than those who did not.

"There's about a 10-pound body weight decrease for every 10-point drop in the glycemic index of all the food a person eats each day," he says.

Who It Helped: Jessica Seaberg, 28, of Minneapolis. "I eradicated most refined sugars from my diet and lost 65 pounds. I stick to whole grain bread, slow-cooking brown rice, and whole wheat pasta."

Add It In: Read labels to avoid added sugars, or better yet, eat fresh produce. Healthy swaps include a baked sweet potato (48 on the glycemic index) instead of a russet potato (94); grapes (49) instead of dates (103); pasta (45) instead of pizza (60); and Nutella (30) instead of jelly beans (80). And skip the liquid glucose known as juice.