

Lose weight, not friends. Diet rules that don't suck

Get rid of self-defeating excuses with these easy tips

By Camille Noe Pagan

If weight loss came in a pill, the list of side effects might include "May cause shortness of cash" and "Some users experience a loss of friendships." After all, that's what happens when you spend half a paycheck on healthy food and pass up happy-hour invites so you can avoid the bar snacks.

And those side effects aren't just misery inducing, they're self-defeating too: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that people who turned these pitfalls into excuses were up to 76 percent less likely to lose weight than those who figured out ways around them. This advice will help you battle the bulge without missing a beat of your life.

Lose weight, not friends

Ever notice that the day you announce you're starting a new diet, your friends go AWOL? Here's why: Cutting calories causes your level of serotonin (a feel-good brain chemical) to nosedive, leaving you cranky and unpleasant to be around. To keep your serotonin levels in check, figure out how many calories your body needs based on your activity level (find the formulas at WomensHealthMag.com/Calories). And make sure those calories are split evenly among protein, whole grains, and produce at every meal.

"Unbalanced meals—made entirely of refined carbs, for example—cause blood-sugar fluctuations that make you irritable," says Caroline M. Apovian, M.D.,

director of the Nutrition and Weight Management Center at Boston Medical Center.

Apovian also recommends adding omega-3 fatty acids to your diet, because research shows that they may fight depression and slow digestion, which helps you stay full longer. (Try eating two or three three-ounce servings of salmon a week, or adding a tablespoon of olive oil, canola oil, or flaxseeds into your daily meals.)

Lose weight, not money

When you're on a diet, you expect your stomach to be on the empty side — not your wallet. But researchers at the University of Washington found that the cost of healthy, nutrient-dense foods like whole grains and lean meats has increased nearly 30 percent in the past four years, while candy and soft drinks have gone up only 15 percent.

One money-saving tactic: Eat less meat. "Meat is one of the priciest items on a grocery bill, and most Americans eat more of it than they should," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, R.D., a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association and the author of *The Flexitarian Diet*. Plus, meat is a source of excess calories and saturated fat.

Most women can slash around 15 percent of their daily calories by sticking to one or two servings of meat a day, estimates Blatner. Fill the void with fiber-rich foods like beans, oatmeal, and brown rice, plus hearty veggies like portobello mushrooms and eggplant. All of these will fill you up for a fraction of the calories and cash.

Lose weight, not time

In a recent study, 41 percent of women cited "not enough time" as the reason they don't eat better. Spending just an hour or two on the weekend shopping for a week's worth of healthy meals and getting a jump-start on the prep work (cutting veggies, making marinades) will save you time and pounds in the long run. A survey by the CDC found that almost 40 percent of people who lost a significant amount of weight and kept it off planned their weekly meals.

"When you don't map out your meals, you're too tempted to grab whatever's nearby, which is often high-calorie junk," says Elizabeth Ricanati, M.D., founding medical director of the Lifestyle 180 Program at the Cleveland Clinic.

Lose weight, not muscle

If you drop weight without lifting any, you risk shedding muscle tissue instead of fat. Muscle takes more than twice as many calories to maintain, and it keeps your metabolism revving at peak calorie-burning speed, so it's important to hang on to it, says Donald Hensrud, M.D., an associate professor of preventive medicine and nutrition at the College of Medicine at the Mayo Clinic.

Your best strategy is to eat lots of protein and strength train for 20 to 30 minutes two or three times a week. Protein will fuel those workouts and help you maintain lean muscle, says Hensrud. Eat at least three or four servings of two to three ounces of protein-rich beans, soy, fish, lean meat, poultry, or low-fat dairy every day.

Lose weight, not your lifestyle

Watching your waistline doesn't mean you have to become a recluse who spends every spare moment on the elliptical machine. In fact, an all-or-nothing approach is counterproductive. "Many women make changes they'll never be able to stick with — like eating nothing but raw food or vowing to go for a run at 5 a.m. every

day — and set themselves up for failure," says Hensrud. "Total deprivation doesn't work."

He advocates skipping extreme regimens in favor of small changes. When he asked a group of overweight study subjects to make several small lifestyle shifts — such as eating breakfast, having as many veggies as they'd like with each meal, and watching TV for only as long as they'd exercised that day — they dropped an average of eight pounds in two weeks. "When you combine a bunch of little strategies, the cumulative effect can be huge, and you won't feel as if you've given up your entire life to be slim."