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Most people have been taught that losing weight is a matter of simple math. Cut calories – specifically 3,500 calories, and you'll lose a pound. But as it turns out, experts are learning that this decades-old strategy is actually pretty misguided. "This idea of 'a calorie in and a calorie out' when it comes to weight loss is not only antiquated, it's just wrong," says Dr. Fatima Cody Stanford, an obesity specialist and assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at Harvard Medical School. The truth is that even careful calorie calculations don't always yield uniform results. How your body burns calories depends on a number of factors, including the type of food you eat, your body's metabolism, and even the type of organisms living in your gut. You can eat the exact same number of calories as someone else, yet have very different outcomes when it comes to your weight. "Drop the calories notion," says Dr. Stanford. It's time to take a different approach, she says, putting the emphasis on improving diet quality and making sustainable lifestyle improvements to achieve a healthy weight. Three main factors affect how your body processes calories.

1. Your gut microbiome. Trillions of organisms live in your gut, and the predominant types may influence how many calories your body absorbs from food. Researchers have found that people who are naturally thin have different types of organisms living inside them than those who are overweight. "Taking the gut microbiota out of people who are lean and placing it in people who have overweight or obesity can result in weight shifts," says Dr. Stanford. This may occur because some types of organisms in the gut are able to break down and use more calories from certain foods than other types of organisms.
2. Your metabolism. Each body has a "set point" that governs weight, says Dr. Stanford. This set point reflects several factors, including your genes, your environment, and your behaviors. Your hypothalamus, a region at the base of your brain that also regulates things like your body temperature, stands guard to keep your body weight from dipping below that set point—which is not really a bonus if you're trying to lose weight. This is why you might find your weight plateauing even if you are diligently dieting and exercising, and also why a majority — 96% — of people who lose a large amount of weight regain it, says Dr. Stanford. "Researchers studying the show *The Biggest Loser*, which helps contestants lose large amounts of weight through a stringent plan of diet and exercise, found that after weight loss, contestants' bodies would fight back in an attempt to regain the weight," she says. The resting metabolic rate for contestants, which measures the number of calories the body uses just running its everyday functions, plummeted after their dramatic weight loss. This made it become very challenging to avoid regaining some weight because of "metabolic adaptation," says Dr. Stanford.
3. The type of food you eat. Your food choices may also influence your calorie intake, and not just because of their specific calorie content. One 2019 study published in *Cell Metabolism* found that eating processed foods seems to spur people to eat more calories compared with eating unprocessed foods. In the study, 20 people (10 men and 10 women) were split into two groups. They all were offered meals with the same number of calories, as well as similar amounts of sugar, sodium, fat, fiber, and micronutrients. But there was one key difference: one group was given unprocessed foods, and the other got ultra-processed options. After two weeks, the groups switched and ate the other type of diet for the following two weeks. "People who ate the ultra-processed food gained weight," says Dr. Stanford. Each group was given meals with the same number of calories and instructed to eat as much as they wanted, but when participants ate the processed foods, they ate 500 calories more each day on average. The same people's calorie intake decreased when they ate the unprocessed foods. What's the lesson? Not all food is created equal. "The brain likes foods that are healthy, that are in their natural form," says Dr. Stanford. If counting calories isn't a dependable way to manage your weight, what can you do to shed extra pounds? Dr. Stanford recommends the following: Focus on diet quality. When planning your meals, try to cut down on or eliminate processed foods, which can drive your body to consume more. Instead, focus on choosing unprocessed foods, including lean meats, whole grains, and lots of fruits and vegetables in their natural form. Exercise regularly (as well as vigorously). Aim to get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise each week. Moderate exercise is done at a level where you can talk, but not sing. "A lot of people think moderate exercise is a casual walk to the garden, but it's more like walking up a large hill," she says. While any movement is better than nothing, work toward achieving a more vigorous level of exercise when you can. Sleep soundly. Poor sleep quality can lead to weight gain, as can a sleep schedule that is out of sync with the body's natural daily pattern, known as circadian rhythm. Your body wants to sleep at night and be awake during the day. "The Nurses' Health Study, which followed nurses for 20 years, found that those who worked the night shift gained more weight over time," says Dr. Stanford. The body gets perturbed when you disrupt its natural rhythm. The same is true if you are getting poor-quality sleep or not enough. A lack of sleep affects your weight in much the same way as hormonal shifts, making you want to eat more. So, addressing sleep problems with your doctor should be a priority. Check your medications. Sometimes medication causes weight gain. Be aware if you start a new medication and you notice you're putting on weight. Your doctor may be able to prescribe an alternative that doesn't have the same side effect. Reduce your stress levels. Stress, like poor sleep, can lead to weight gain. Controlling stress can help you keep excess pounds at bay. Consult a professional. "A lot of people believe it's a moral failing if they are unable to lose weight," says Dr. Stanford. But it's not. As with other medical conditions, many people will need help from a doctor. Successful weight loss may require more than just diet and exercise. "You may never have thought about using medications to lose weight. Only 2% of people who meet the criteria for the use of anti-obesity medications actually get them. This means that 98% of people who could be treated, aren't," she says. Some people may also need surgery to lose weight, she says. Don't be afraid to seek help if you need it.

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Written by Kris Gunnars, BSc on May 11, 2018

"Eat less, move more." You might have heard this message before. While the strategy makes total sense, it's wrong to assume that the only reason people gain or lose weight is because of calories. The issue is much more complicated than that. Different foods affect hunger and hormones in different ways, and not all calories are equal. The truth is, there are many things you can do to lose weight — without ever counting a single calorie. Here are 7 proven ways to put fat loss on "autopilot."

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Losing weight can be as simple as changing your breakfast. Two separate studies have shown that eating eggs in the morning (compared to a breakfast of bagels) can help you lose fat without trying. In one of these studies, 30 overweight or obese women ate either bagels or eggs for breakfast (1). The egg group ended up eating fewer calories at lunch, the rest of the day and for the next 36 hours. Put simply, the eggs were so filling that the women naturally ate fewer calories at subsequent meals. Another study split 152 overweight people into two groups. One group ate eggs, the other ate bagels. Both groups were on a weight loss diet (2). After eight weeks, the egg group had lost significantly more weight than the bagel group: 65% more weight loss (2 lbs vs 1.3 lbs) 61% greater reduction in BMI 34% greater reduction in waist circumference 16% greater reduction in body fat percentage

The difference in weight loss wasn't huge, but the results clearly show that simple things like changing one meal can have an effect. Another awesome benefit of eating eggs is that they are among the healthiest foods in the world. Although eggs are high in cholesterol, studies suggest they do not raise your bad cholesterol or lead to heart disease, as previously believed (3, 4, 5, 6). If you think you don't have time to cook a healthy breakfast, think again. Preparing a breakfast with some eggs and veggies doesn't have to take any longer than 5–10 minutes. Just set your alarm clock a few minutes earlier and problem solved.

Summary

Studies show that eating eggs for breakfast can help you automatically eat fewer calories in subsequent meals, compared to a breakfast of bagels. The human brain is the most complex object in the universe. It tends to work in mysterious ways, and its control of eating behavior is incredibly complicated. It's the brain that ultimately determines whether you should or should not eat. But there is one neat thing you can do to "trick" your brain into thinking that it has eaten more food — use smaller plates. The larger your plates or bowls, the less your brain thinks you have eaten. By using smaller plates, you trick your brain into feeling more satisfied with fewer calories. Interestingly, psychologists have been studying this, and it seems to work. However, one study concluded that the effect may be weaker for those who are overweight (7). For more ideas, check out this article on 8 tips to reduce food portions.

Summary

It is possible to "trick" the brain into thinking that it has eaten more food by using smaller plates. There is a lot of evidence that protein can increase fat burning and reduce hunger, helping you lose weight naturally. In fact, studies show that protein boosts metabolism more than any other macronutrient (8, 9). This is because the body spends more calories digesting and making use of protein than it does fat and carbs. Protein also increases satiety, leading to significantly reduced hunger (10). In one study, increasing protein intake to 30% of calories led participants to eat 441 fewer calories per day (11). Many studies show that increasing your protein intake can lead to automatic weight loss, even when eating until full (12, 13, 14, 15). Protein can also help you gain more muscle, especially if you also lift weights. Muscle tissue is metabolically active, meaning that it burns a small number of calories, even at rest (16, 17, 18). One of the best ways to reduce calorie intake is to eat more animal foods like meat, fish and eggs, preferably at every meal.

Summary

Eating more protein can boost your metabolism and reduce your hunger. It can also increase muscle mass, helping you burn more calories around the clock. Another way to feel more satisfied with fewer calories is to eat foods that have a low calorie density. This includes foods that have a high water content, such as vegetables and some fruits. Studies consistently show that dieters who eat foods that are less calorie dense lose more weight than those who eat foods with a high calorie density (19, 20, 21). In one study, women who ate soup (low calorie density) lost 50% more weight than women who ate a calorie-dense snack (22). Vegetables are also rich in soluble fiber, which has been shown to cause weight loss in some studies (23, 24, 25). Another benefit of soluble fiber is that it gets broken down by bacteria in the digestive tract. This process produces a fatty acid called butyrate, which is believed to have anti-obesity effects, at least in rats (26). Put simply, you can lose weight without reducing the actual amount of food you eat just by choosing foods with a low calorie density, such as high-fiber vegetables.

Summary

Choosing foods with a low energy density, such as vegetables and some fruits, can help you feel more satisfied with fewer calories. One of the best ways to start losing weight without calorie counting or portion control is to reduce your carb intake. Studies consistently show that people who eat fewer carbohydrates, naturally start to eat fewer calories and lose weight without any major effort (27, 28). In one study, 53 overweight and obese women were randomly assigned to a low-carb group or a calorie-restricted, low-fat group for six months (29). Women in the low-carb group lost twice as much weight (18.7 lbs/8.5 kg) while eating until full, compared to the low-fat group (8.6 lbs/3.9 kg), which was calorie restricted. The best way to cut carbs is to reduce or eliminate major carb sources from your diet, including sugars, sweets and sodas, as well as starchy foods like bread, pasta, potatoes, etc. Getting into the range of 100–150 grams of carbs per day can be useful. If you want to lose weight fast, going under 50 grams per day can be extremely effective. Reducing carbs has another great benefit — it lowers your insulin levels. This makes the kidneys start shedding excess sodium and water from the body, significantly reducing bloat and water weight (30, 31).

Summary

Reducing your carb intake can reduce your appetite and cause automatic weight loss (without calorie counting or portion control). It also leads to significant reductions in water weight. Sleep and stress levels often get ignored when discussing health and weight. Both are incredibly important for the optimal function of your body and hormones. In fact, inadequate sleep is one of the strongest risk factors for obesity. One study showed that short sleep duration raised the risk by 89% in children and 55% in adults (32). Poor sleep can also increase hunger and cravings, causing a biochemical tendency for weight gain by disrupting hunger hormones like ghrelin and leptin (33, 34). Excessive stress can increase your levels of the hormone cortisol, which is known to increase belly fat accumulation and the risk of chronic, Western diseases like type II diabetes and heart disease (35, 36, 37). As a result, it is very important to make time for quality sleep, as well as avoid unnecessary stressors in your life.

Summary

Poor sleep and excess stress can mess up important metabolic hormones like ghrelin, leptin and cortisol. Getting these hormones under control should reduce appetite and unnatural cravings. Distracted or inattentive eating is one reason people overeat and gain weight. Being in tune with your body and paying attention to hunger and fullness or satiety signals is very important. Many of those who struggle with weight gain or obesity eat out of habit or boredom, rather than necessity. This often happens when people are doing something else at the same time, like watching TV or browsing the internet. In these situations, practicing mindful eating could be useful. Mindful eating is a strategy that helps people distinguish between emotional eating and real hunger. It involves paying full attention to what you are eating, without any distractions, chewing slowly and savoring every bite. Not only does mindful eating make meals more satisfying, it also reduces the risk of overeating and weight gain (38).

Summary

Distracted eating or snacking out of boredom are major reasons for weight gain and obesity. Eating only when you are hungry and eating without any distractions should help keep your waistline in check. By making a few simple changes that optimize hormones, reduce hunger and boost metabolism, you can lose a lot of weight without ever counting a single calorie. Reddit and its partners use cookies and similar technologies to provide you with a better experience. By accepting all cookies, you agree to our use of cookies to deliver and maintain our services and site, improve the quality of Reddit, personalize Reddit content and advertising, and measure the effectiveness of advertising. By rejecting non-essential cookies, Reddit may still use certain cookies to ensure the proper functionality of our platform. For more information, please see our Cookie Notice and our Privacy Policy. Reddit and its partners use cookies and similar technologies to provide you with a better experience. 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The need to lose weight, "eat less and exercise more" has been beaten into our brains for too long now by fitness, nutrition, and medical professionals. This dogma has made the number of calories the dominant factor in our minds when it comes to weight. Calories are the standout component on nutritional labels, diets, and food guides, as well as the deciding factor in many of our food choices when we are dieting. As we've seen over the last decade, the weight loss equation of calories in versus calories out is oversimplified and, in most circumstances, just plain wrong. I'm a big proponent of ditching the calorie counter. I rarely mention calories in my nutrition sessions with clients and discourage the use of programs and apps that emphasize calories. In today's post, we're going to explore why counting calories is often ineffective and how to lose or maintain your weight without relying on this antiquated method. And bear with me because we have to review a little bit about calories now in order to understand why they don't have to be the focus of our attention in the long run. How to lose weight without counting calories Not all calories are created equal. A calorie is a calorie, right? WRONG. In a laboratory setting, where the energy of an isolated system is constant, 500 calories of spinach and 500 calories of Skittles would, in fact, release the same amount of energy. But lab settings and the law of thermodynamics don't translate to living, breathing organisms, as there is nothing "isolated" about our systems. The spinach and the Skittles interact with our physiology, which entails a very complex process of transformation. Food is much more than just calories; it is information for our cells. Every bite of food you eat sends out a specific set of instructions to the body—instructions that influence satiety, metabolic rate, brain activity, blood sugar, and the way we store fat. The same number of calories from different types of food can have very different biological effects. Let's compare how your body deals with Skittles versus spinach. When you eat Skittles, a huge amount of fructose heads straight to the liver, where it starts storing that sugar as fat. Fructose bypasses your hunger hormones, leptin and ghrelin, so your brain never gets the message that you've just consumed a bunch of calories and do not need to eat more. Instead, your brain's pleasure-based reward center is triggered by the sugar, which prompts intense cravings and drives you to consume more sugar to maintain the high. Low-starch vegetables such as spinach are high in fiber, which is digested slowly and does not lead to glucose and insulin spikes. Because of all the fiber, your stomach would distend, and that sends a signal to your brain that you're full, even though you haven't taken in that many calories. In addition to satiety (feeling full), the nutrients and fiber in spinach optimize your metabolism, reduce inflammation, protect against disease, lower cholesterol, boost detoxification, and feed the beneficial bacteria in your gut. As you can see, Skittles and spinach evoke an entirely different metabolic response, despite an identical calorie count. Many other factors, such as macronutrients, food quality, blood sugar regulation, gut bacteria, circadian rhythm, etc., are more influential over how much fat you accumulate than simply cutting calories. So if you're not counting calories, what do you do instead? 1. JERF (Just Eat Real Food) It's not that calories don't matter at all; it's that nutrients matter more [source]. Seeing calories as the most important factor in choosing what foods to consume is an overly simplistic view that doesn't consider the science of nutritional quality. If you're living off of diet soda and 100-calorie snack packs to try and lose weight, you may be eating very few calories, but you're consuming a ton of chemicals, GMOs, allergenic and inflammatory ingredients—and almost no real nutrients [source]. With a diet of highly processed food like this, you're likely often cranky, brain-fogged, malnourished, struggling to maintain a healthy weight, and hungry because your body is still looking for the nutrients it needs [source]! Meanwhile, the person eating a higher-calorie, real foods diet, which includes healthy fats like avocados and nuts, as well as high-fiber foods such as fruits and veggies, is enjoying a healthy weight, better moods, more energy, and good sleep. The body knows how to use the rich nutrients these foods contain in the service of good health. By cutting out the processed and packaged foods and focusing on real whole foods, you'll be providing your body with a wide variety of nutrients that it can use to promote optimal health [source]. Aim to have 6–8 servings of nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables a day, and avoid inflammatory, nutrient-poor foods as much as possible—namely sugar, flour, refined flour, hydrogenated oils, preservatives, and artificial flavors and sweeteners—basically anything in a package with a long shelf-life. These ultra-processed foods have clearly been shown to be closely associated with weight gain and chronic disease [source]. On the other hand, high-fiber diets (which happen to be high in nutrients as well) are linked with the prevention of chronic diseases (including cancer, heart disease, and diabetes), and—of course—obesity prevention and weight loss [source]. If you want to count something, try counting nutrients! 2. Balance your macronutrients. One of the keys to successful and sustainable weight loss is eating the right combinations of macronutrients that fill you up and keep you satiated [source]. I tell my clients to incorporate PFCF (protein, fat, carbs, and fiber) at every meal to fill the belly, balance blood sugar, send the message of satiety to the brain, and supply the body with health-promoting nutrients. If you snack on a handful of Skittles, you'll be hungry shortly after and searching for your next hit of sugar. If you snack on an apple and a handful of almonds, the protein, fat, and carbs with fiber will balance your blood sugar and keep you full and satiated for a few hours. 3. How you can eat until you're full, without gaining weight. One of the most important things to understand when it comes to dieting is the concept of energy density. Foods that have higher calories by weight are considered energy dense. This sounds good, but it's not unless you are running a marathon. When you eat a large meal, your stomach distends, and you feel full. So if you eat food that is packed with calories but not much water or fiber, you'll have to eat more food to feel full, it will take a long time to fill your stomach up, and you will take in many more calories in the whole process [source]. Compare, for example, 100 calories worth of oranges versus chicken. It takes about 1-½ oranges to reach that 100 calories. Whereas a regular 3.5-ounce serving size (roughly the size of your palm) of boneless, skinless chicken breast is 135 calories, and if you cook it with a tablespoon of olive oil, you'll have added 119 more calories, making a total of 254 calories just in the palm of your hand! So why are we talking about calories when we say you shouldn't have to count them? Just to prove a point about the difference in eating high and low energy density foods. The reason you can eat more of the low energy density foods is that they are plants, and they contain fiber. But what about the animal foods? Sure they have more protein per ounce, but there is a larger proportion of fat within meat or dairy naturally, giving you loads of calories per ounce and zero fiber in a relatively small package. You have to eat a lot more to get full, and that equals more calories. Whereas fruits, veggies, and grains have fewer calories per ounce and are just packed with fiber. So you fill up your stomach more easily and feel satisfied, while the number of calories you have consumed is much less. When you eat a diet of whole foods, particularly plant-based foods (which are the only foods that contain fiber), not only will it be more nutritious, but you can pretty much eat until you are full—consistently. Isn't that amazing? You will not have to count calories because the fiber will fill you up way before you've consumed enough calories to worry about. That's why eating lots of fiber-rich plant foods is the secret to a sustainable diet that can last a lifetime without calorie counting [source]! 4. Get in touch with your hunger and satiety signals. Meticulously measuring, weighing, and counting at each meal and snack sounds like a real pain! Not to mention, it fosters a disconnected, fearful, and obsessive relationship with food—one that focuses on restriction and deprivation instead of quality, sucking the joy right out of eating! It's also not sustainable in the long-term. Rather than calorie counting, I support the concept of healthy intuitive eating. Intuitive listening and eating is one of the most important tools for attaining and maintaining a healthy weight [source]. Studies have shown long-term beneficial effects on body image and self-esteem, overall well-being, and achieving a healthy weight [source]. For many women, being on diets their whole lives has severed their mind-body connection, so it may take some time to relearn how to recognize the signals for hunger and satiety. Start each meal by rating your hunger on a scale of 0 to 10. Zero is full, and 10 is ravenous. Remove all distractions, such as your phone, computer, and TV, and take a few deep breaths with the meal in front of you. Eat slowly and attentively, chewing each bite thoroughly and noticing the tastes, textures, and aromas of the food [source]. When you're halfway through the meal, rate your hunger again on a scale of 0 to 10. Aim to stop eating at 80% full. Once you've gotten reacquainted with your body's satiety signals and eat healthy whole foods, you'll stop overeating and end up consuming the exact number of calories your body needs. 5. Pay attention to meal timing. We hear a lot about what we should be eating, but minimal attention is given to when. Eating according to your body's natural rhythms is crucial for weight loss. Your digestive fire is at its peak between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., so eating a big, healthy lunch during that time is most efficient for digestion and assimilation of nutrients. Our bodies love routine, so aim to eat at roughly the same times every day, e.g., breakfast at 8 a.m., lunch at 1 p.m., and dinner at 6 p.m. As the digestive fire is weak in the evening, try to stop eating by 7 p.m. ideally, or 8 p.m. at the latest. Fasting for at least 12 hours between dinner and breakfast helps burn fat. Fasting promotes the secretion of human growth hormone, optimizes muscle building, and normalizes insulin sensitivity. If you've made the switch to a whole foods diet, but you're still having issues getting to your goal weight, check out this post with 13 essential steps for weight loss. If you still feel stuck, I suggest working with a health professional to take a closer look at your gut health, metabolism, nutritional status, cortisol, blood sugar markers (fasting glucose, insulin), sleep, physical activity, thyroid, and sex hormones. This post was medically reviewed by Dr. Kimberly Langdon, M.D., a university-trained obstetrician/gynecologist with 19 years of clinical experience. Learn more about Hello Glow's medical review board here. As always, this is not personal medical advice, and we recommend that you talk with your doctor. 705