

Solve Two Problems to Lose 20 Pounds

In my mid-30s I was 20 pounds overweight. Working out at the YMCA, and commuting by bike or on foot for two years, had stopped my weight gain. But I'd never succeeded in changing my eating habits because I didn't know how.



In hindsight I think stopping the gain is a sign that you're moving toward a solution. I was probably building muscle and losing some fat, though not enough. I had two problems: I hadn't yet found a healthy diet, and my workouts were not intense enough. I didn't know what a high-intensity workout felt like or how to get one.

That's the problem with most mainstream workout methods in a nutshell. You get just enough results to make you feel better, but not enough to make you really strong and fit. These programs are so widely accepted and so reasonable sounding that a lot of people don't even wonder what they're missing. But a lot of people probably know more about a healthy diet than I did, if only because they like to cook. My food choices were abominable.

A specific health risk caused me to start learning about healthier eating. My favorite aunt, 30 years older, trim and active, was diagnosed with osteoporosis. The fact that I too would "get old" became real to me. Eating healthfully to save my bones AND to lose weight became a now-or-never task. My seemingly impossible requirements for a new eating plan:

- It had to be a permanent change, not a "diet."
- Everything I ate had to have nutritional value and not be loaded with sugar, etc.
- I'd have to enjoy the foods and not be distracted by hunger throughout the day.
- I don't really cook. Most meals have to be convenient.
- Combined with my workouts, it had to cause weight loss.

Replacing old habits with new ones

I learned to make small changes to my diet, one at a time. It became easier to build on each change with another. I made one change per week starting in January 2000:

- Gave up Coke for sparkling water.
- Ate fruit at work twice a day. I enjoyed it, and it spoiled my appetite for junk snacks.
- Had healthy frozen meals for lunch or dinner (from a brand that makes frozen Indian and Thai dishes) most days; other staples were low-fat tuna salad, cheeseless turkey sandwiches, and fresh or smoked salmon with a few crackers and steamed spinach.
- Quit my favorite junk foods one at a time.
- Cut down on peanut-butter sandwiches, which I'd been eating daily all my life.
- Counted calories meticulously with a customizable software program. I saved into it the "formulas" for my tuna salad, cereal with milk, sandwiches, and so on, measuring ingredients for each one so the calorie tracking would be accurate.
- Went to bed slightly hungry every night.

Giving up Coke for sparkling water wasn't too hard. Next, it turned out that fish and vegetables are easy to make, especially if the fish is canned tuna or smoked salmon. To tuna salad I added only low-fat canola mayo, lemon juice, salt and pepper, and occasionally sunflower seeds. Nonperishables were key to my convenience requirement, and I liked these meals.

A good eating record during the week made it easier to avoid pizza and other junk on the weekends. New habits started to replace the old ones. New, good habits may take a while to make you forget the old temptations. But once in place, new habits are just as solid as the old habits were. Getting to that point is a real relief.

Why count calories?

I think most people who can't lose weight are wildly underestimating their intake. I know I was—even after I saw a nutritionist. She told me I wasn't overeating, but her assessment of my food diary was way off. I wasn't measuring portions, so how could her assessment be any good? So if you're going to count calories in and calories out, don't

guess. Spend the time it takes to get accurate calorie counts for everything you eat. If this adds up to 3,000 calories a day and you're a sedentary petite woman, you've identified a problem.

Other people I've talked to about food have usually agreed that they don't really know, for instance, how many cups of granola they eat each day, how much meat or mayo they put on a sandwich, and so on. More than they think, if they're trying to lose weight and it's not yet happening.

I didn't try to figure out how many calories I "needed." I used the knowledge of what I was actually eating as a way to spot opportunities to cut, as painlessly as possible.

Looking closely at calories leads to looking at ingredients. Even though I needed convenient meals, I started cutting back on processed foods to the extent I could because they were full of corn syrup, sugar, trans fats, and who knows what.

I decided not to weigh myself for two weeks while I focused on my new foods and workouts.

Results

In February 2000 when I stepped onto the gym's scale again, I immediately looked at the staff guy behind the front desk. "Does this need to be calibrated?" I asked. "No, it's accurate," he answered. I had lost four pounds. I had never felt so gratified! By July I had lost ten, and by January 2001 I was back down to 125, my 25-year-old weight, from a high of 144.

Weight loss was a three-part project that involved research, attention to detail, and discipline. During the next three years, any time I gained a few pounds, I cut out any heavy weekend foods and re-focused on the healthy habits. I experimented, haphazardly, with higher-intensity workouts, and I went to a boxing gym for a while. The energy I burned and the muscle I gained, which allowed me to do other strenuous pursuits, made it easier to keep weight off.

Since I started CrossFitting in 2004, I've gained five pounds. My jeans size has gone down one but my shirts are tight in the shoulders. Is it possible I've gained five pounds of muscle? Before CF I couldn't do more than one pull-up, had never deadlifted, had never done kettlebell snatches or box jumps. These are all things I do with enthusiasm now. I'm so much stronger that I do think my new weight is mostly muscle. That is the result of true high-intensity, safe workouts.

I'm not the healthiest eater in the gym by a long shot, but since 2000 my eating habits have changed dramatically enough. My small changes, one at a time, have led me to the point where I can't even imagine wanting some of the junk food I used to like. Maybe someday I'll work the Zone Diet into my life as a lot of CrossFitters have done. It has already influenced me to minimize processed starches like bread and cereal and sugar instead of avoiding meat and fat.

Today, I eat a small breakfast of meat, cheese, and nuts; a lunch of whatever on the menu has the most protein, plus a big helping of fresh fruit salad; and dinner of whatever is handy in a smallish portion.

Eating healthy felt better once I got used to it. Doing CrossFit taught me what a workout is in a way that no other type of trainer did—because they don't know how, any more than I did when I was at the Y. My results continue to take care of themselves.

—Fran Mason
fran@crossfitseattle.com