

Habits Not Diets

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With swimsuit weather right around the corner, many of us are once again faced with the daunting task of shedding the layers of flab we have accumulated over a long winter of eating and drinking. Of course this comes as no surprise because removing our "winter coats" has become a ritual for us every spring. This year, instead of wondering "how can I get rid of this belly in time for the beach," why not ask yourself a totally different question: "How can I lose this excess baggage permanently so I don't have to keep taking it off every year?"

If you are having a difficult time keeping fat off permanently, it is probably because you foster the entirely wrong attitude towards nutrition. For most of us, our idea of a summer shape-up program consists of jumping on the latest diet bandwagon, which we inevitably end up falling off of when the summer is over. Losing weight is easy; the hard part is keeping it off. Instead of looking for quick fixes, we need to focus on developing better eating and exercise habits that we can maintain for the long haul. Instead of going on and off diets, we need to completely change our approach and make exercise and good nutrition our way of life. Small changes in our daily habits, over time, can produce quantum changes in your body and your health.

The first habit you must develop is to keep track of your daily caloric intake. Calories do count! Human physiology dictates that losing fat is a simple matter of consuming fewer calories than you burn up. Too much of anything gets stored as fat. However, it is not necessary to starve yourself. In fact, you can actually eat more and still become leaner by eating small meals more frequently. Five small meals, each eaten three hours apart, will speed up your metabolic rate, allow your body to absorb and utilize more nutrients, stabilize blood sugar and insulin levels, and increase your energy levels. Most importantly, small frequent meals will decrease fat storage by controlling your portion size and never giving your body more calories than it can utilize in one sitting.

The trick is to decrease your calories slightly below your maintenance level but not to cut them too far. Women can usually eat as many as 1400-1800 calories per day and men 2200-2600 per day and still lose bodyfat. Most diets are based on severe calorie restriction, often dipping well below 1000 calories per day. This approach may work initially, but it will never work in the long run. Many people believe that they can just skip meals or "starve the fat off" by hardly eating anything at all, but it's not that simple. Your body is an extremely efficient fat storing machine during times of famine or deprivation. The direct and unavoidable consequence of very low calorie diet is a reduction in lean body mass and a decrease in metabolic rate. When this occurs, your progress will grind to a screeching halt. Once this dreaded plateau strikes, most frustrated and discouraged dieters end up falling off the wagon and gaining all the weight back.

The next habit is to divide your calories into the correct portions of protein, carbohydrates and fats. Each meal should contain approximately 30% of the calories from lean proteins and 55% from natural complex carbohydrates. The remaining 15% will come from fat. For high energy levels, your best sources of carbs include 100% whole grain cereals and breads, potatoes, yams, brown rice, oatmeal, beans, legumes, vegetables and fruits. Great sources of protein for muscle development include egg whites, lowfat dairy products, chicken, turkey, fish and lean cuts of red meat. Fats should be kept to a minimum, but cutting all the fat out is not necessary. Essential fatty acids are just as important as amino acids, vitamins and minerals. Your diet must contain a wide variety of natural, unrefined foods. The less processed your food choices are, the better; eating foods in their natural state the way they came out of the ground is ideal.

Plan on losing weight slowly. Everyone wants fast results, but you can't undo a lifetime of inactivity and poor nutrition overnight. If you lose weight at a rate of 1-2 lbs. per week you will be more likely to keep it off permanently. Many diet programs promise rapid weight loss. High

protein, low-carbohydrate diets for example, can take off pounds very quickly, but much of the weight loss consists of water and muscle. Instead of worshipping the almighty scale, measure your progress in terms of body composition. Use your bodyfat percentage as the ultimate yardstick of your success. This will help you distinguish between fat weight and muscle weight. If does you no good to lose 5-6 lbs. per week if it is mostly muscle!

Arguably, the most important habit of all is exercise. Nutrition is only half the battle; the other half is working out. Cardiovascular exercise is the real secret to burning bodyfat. Aerobic activities such as bicycling, walking, jogging, stair-climbing, cross country skiing and rowing are all terrific fat burners. Shoot for at least thirty minutes, three to five times per week for optimal results. Weight training is also essential because the more lean muscle tissue you have, the higher your resting metabolic rate will be. In other words, by developing more muscle, you will be burning more body fat all day long, even when you're not working out.

It is human nature to look for quick fixes. However, when it comes to fat loss, there are no shortcuts. It is easy to fall for the hottest diet craze, the newest workout gizmo, the trendiest class or the latest miracle pill, but the results they produce are often short-lived at best. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Short-term diets never work! Dieting for a few weeks or months just to get in shape for summer, only to put the weight right back on makes absolutely no sense at all! Get off the diet roller coaster once and for all by developing habits that you will be able to maintain for the rest of your life. It may take a little more discipline, patience and hard work this way, but in the end it will all be worth it.