



Losing Weight

The subject of weight loss has probably had more column inches dedicated to it than most other subjects in recent years, but as we are saturated with diet advice and dire warnings about our increasing weight, we are, as a nation, getting fatter.

Recent statistics point to an alarming rise in obesity. The Government's science think tank Foresight predicted in 2007 that if current trends continue, 50% of females will be obese by 2050. The report¹ also claimed that by that date, 90% of adults would be overweight or obese.

Why are we gaining weight?

There are many factors that contribute to our weight gain as a society, and some would argue that it's our preoccupation with diets and weight loss that actually cause us to gain weight. In some studies, dieting, especially in women, has been associated with increased risk of weight gain² and even the onset of binge eating and bulimia³.

Other, more obvious factors are the easy access we all have to high calorie, and high fat foods; the prevalence of fast food and lack of time to prepare meals from scratch; and a sedentary lifestyle aggravated by poor work-life balance – we seem to have no time to exercise.

So, while on the one hand we are seemingly obsessed with celebrity weight and diets, snapping up any celebrity endorsed miracle diet (or detox) plan as it hits the shelves, we're also doing and eating the very opposite to what we should be if we want to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Traditional dieting – does it work?

The mechanics of dieting – eat less than you use and you will lose weight, seem to make sense physiologically. The trouble is that our bodies are complicated instruments, and just because we eat the number of calories, points or whatever the diet plan tells us, doesn't mean we will all lose weight, and certainly not permanently.

Some people are so incensed by the diet industry that they are calling for legal action – Susie Orbach, author of *'Fat is a Feminist Issue'* and member of AnyBody, a group of women and men from psychotherapy, media, fashion, law, art, research and academia, was planning to sue Weight Watchers because of the high failure rate of its weight loss programmes – widely reported at around 95 - 99%.

Looking at the statistics makes for depressing reading. A report published in 2003⁴, and intended for the diet industry, included the statement, “In 2002, 231 million Europeans attempted some form of diet. Of these only 1% will achieve permanent weight loss.” So – even the diet industry is under no illusions about the effectiveness of its own products.

If dieting doesn't work, what does?

The first thing to do if you're concerned about your weight is to check whether you really are overweight – or whether you're worrying for no reason.

If you've identified that you're overweight or obese, you need to tackle the weight from a new perspective. You're overweight because you've been overeating, and it's the overeating that's causing you the problems, not the fat which is a result of it. Don't go straight out to buy the latest diet book, but instead try and look at the reasons you're overeating, what you're eating, and when.

Changing your eating patterns

It's often been said that some people, especially women, eat for comfort or emotional reasons. Are you an emotional eater? If so, try and find your emotional triggers, and deal with the situation or feeling that has made you think you want 'something nice to eat', even if you know that you're not really hungry.

It's not easy for most women to learn to eat whatever they really want, as the diet industry has been dictating for years that we must only eat low fat versions of all the good things in life. Perversely, low calorie and fat foods are often sold on the premise that you can eat more of them simply because they are lower in fat or calories – but the irony is lost on many dieters. Why not reach for an apple instead of a low fat biscuit? Or if you really fancy a biscuit, have something you really enjoy, which will satisfy your craving...you're more likely to stop at one that way!

Intuitive eating works on the premise that we should learn to listen to our bodies. You know that some days you might want a crisp crunchy salad for lunch, while another day you'll be really in the mood for a warming bowl of soup and a crusty roll. If you're following a strict diet regime, eating what you're told, you will never learn to trust the signals that your body sends, telling you when you're hungry and what you want to eat.

There are many courses and books available on 'intuitive eating' – invest in one of these for some ideas.

Get your body moving

Exercise is another vital component to healthy weight loss, and getting your body moving will make you feel better as your body is flooded with endorphins. Pick an activity you love, or could at least learn to like – walking in the park with an iPod on, a yoga or Pilates class, a fun dancing class...all these things are infinitely more fun than pounding a treadmill. Just 30 minutes of activity every day will accelerate your weight loss, and keep you fit and healthy.

Summary

- As a society we are getting fatter but dieting more
- Our busy, yet sedentary lifestyles make it easy to gain weight
- Traditional diets have a high failure rate
- Learning how to eat intuitively, and doing more exercise can lead to permanent, sustainable weight loss

References

1. <http://www.foresight.gov.uk/Obesity/14.pdf>
2. Andrew Hill "Does dieting make you fat?" British Journal of Nutrition (2004), 92, Suppl. 1, S15–S18
3. Stice E (2002) Risk and maintenance factors for eating pathology: a meta-analytic review. Psychol Bull 128, 825–848.
4. <http://www.datamonitor.com/industries/research/?pid=DMCM0682>

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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