



Maintaining your weight

If you find yourself in the enviable position of being a healthy weight, it's a situation that you definitely want to be in for as long as possible. Weight can creep on with very little difficulty at all, a few pounds here and there, a holiday, a few nights out, and before you know it, your jeans don't fit any more.

Losing weight is difficult, and the last thing that you want to do is find yourself seduced into the world of dieting.

Everyday eating traps - emotional eating

Most women will attest to the power of comfort food, but it really is just an illusion. Comfort eating is just eating food that you don't really need, often just to avoid dealing with the problem or the emotions that are stressing you out. If you have a bad day at work, why would the answer to, "Where exactly does my boss get off talking to me like that?" lie in a packet of biscuits?

If you can get a handle on emotional eating, you will probably go a long way towards keeping your weight stable. A study published in *Obesity* (October 2007)¹ found that people who gave in to emotional eating lost less weight when they followed a behaviour-based weight loss program than those who didn't use food to cope with their feelings. The study also found that people who did eat for emotional reasons were more likely to gain weight back after losing it.

It's not just emotions that lead us absent mindedly towards the kitchen – boredom is another trigger for non-hungry eating. Who hasn't found themselves mounting a kitchen raid on an evening when there's nothing on TV? It's easy to say "find a distraction" but if you're truly only eating because you have nothing to do, you will still have nothing to do when you've finished that sandwich, won't you? If you're hungry, eat. If you're bored – do something else.

Eating out

Eating out, having people over for dinner and generally being sociable can play havoc with your waistline. Nobody wants to be a party pooper, but if you try to apply the same rules to social eating as you do your everyday food intake, you can't go too far wrong.

Only eat what you're really hungry for. If you're in a restaurant and the bread basket comes round, you don't have to eat it just because it's there. If what you really crave is a chunk of warm buttered bread, that's fine, but maybe you won't need a starter?

Listen to your body and decide what you really want from the menu, and don't let friends dictate whether you have dessert or not. They will all be far too busy with their own food choices to care whether you're opting to sit out the cheesecake.

When you eat out, don't feel that you have to clear your plate. Of course this also applies to eating at home, but we're all more inclined to get our money's worth when we eat out. If you overeat you will gain weight, no matter whether the food you are eating more of is prepared by a Michelin chef or your own fair hands.

Enjoy your food

One of the big ways that diets fall down is that they can be unappetising, leading people to discard them as soon as something tempting comes along. If you've lost weight through a traditional diet, you could also find that it's hard to get out of the "tell me what and when I should eat" mentality.

When you eat, really take the time to think about the food you want. How will it make you feel? Will it make you feel light and energised or heavy and sluggish? Is it cold outside and you feel like you need some warming food to sustain you? Or are you really not hungry?

Eat the food that you really want and not just the food you think you should want. That means just because you think you want some chocolate, because you've had a hard day, stop and think. Is it chocolate you need, or a rest? If you do want the chocolate, savour it and don't guzzle the whole bar in one sitting. Make a point of enjoying every mouthful, and you might find that after a couple of squares of chocolate, you are satisfied.

The same applies to healthy foods. If you really want a filling meal but opt for a 'healthy salad' you won't be satisfied, and you'll soon be on the lookout for more to snack on.

Exercise

Many people think of exercise as simply a way to lose weight, rather than an ongoing part of a healthy lifestyle. It's all very well keeping up the regular gym visits while you're trying to shift the pounds, but if you suddenly stop, thinking your work is done, you won't stay at target weight for very long.

It's not just a weight loss thing, exercise and staying fit has a multitude of benefits, such as prevention of heart disease, strengthening bones and improving cardiovascular function. One surprising result from a survey showed that it isn't necessarily high intensity exercisers that keep weight off most successfully, but in fact women who exercised moderately.²

A walking fitness programme was prescribed to women after they had lost weight, and was found to improve maintenance of weight loss, fat mass, and waist

circumference in the women walking two to three hours every week – while the women who put in more effort and walked for four to six hours a week saw no better results than the women who did no exercise. The three hours a week walkers also kept their fitness activities up for longer. Moderation really is key.

Summary

- Emotional eaters gain more weight than non-emotional eaters
- When you're bored – do something, don't eat something
- You don't have to over eat just because someone else has cooked for you
- Enjoy what you eat
- Keep exercising moderately

References

1. Internal Disinhibition Predicts Weight Regain Following Weight Loss and Weight Loss Maintenance - Heather M. Niemeier, Suzanne Phelan, Joseph L. Fava and Rena R. Wing
2. M. Fogelholm, K. Kukkonen-Harjula, A. Nenonen, M. Pasanen, Effects of Walking Training on Weight Maintenance After a Very-Low-Energy Diet in Premenopausal Obese Women. Arch Intern Med 160:2177-2184 (2000)

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

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