

WHY AM I HAVING PROBLEMS LOSING WEIGHT?

YOU'RE EATING MORE THAN YOU THINK

Surveys show that people always underestimate just how much they are eating – one study found women were eating 800 more calories each day than they thought. Unless you are weighing every mouthful, it is very hard to be precise.

DIET/ EXERCISE BALANCE

Yes, you can lose weight just by eating less, but by exercising also the calories the body uses up will be boosted. It will also help maintain, and even increase, muscle bulk which will, in turn, raise your resting metabolic rate.

MISSING BREAKFAST

A lot of us miss breakfast, but it has been shown that people who eat breakfast lose more weight than those who don't. If missed, we also tend to end up snacking by the middle of the morning on foods high in sugar and fat.

'HEALTHY' SNACKS AND FOODS

Be careful with 'healthy' snacks like dried fruit: one mouthful is equivalent to a large bunch of grapes. It's the same with energy bars and muesli. They are healthy, but if a cereal is full of fruit and nuts, or has been coated with oils to make it stick together in clusters, it will be dense in energy and high in calories. Oats or flake cereals give you more volume for fewer calories.

Salads are the same – the dressings used are frequently very high in calories, and restaurant salads often are higher in calories than other foods we perceive to be more unhealthy (eg pizzas and burgers).

PORTION DISTORTION

Lots of people who review their diet learn better eating habits, but then their portion sizes creep up: the food is still healthy, but eating too much will still increase your calorie intake. If you are dieting, half of your plate should be vegetables; a quarter should be starchy carbohydrates, such as pasta or rice; and the other quarter, a portion of protein about the size of a deck of cards.

TOO MUCH FRUIT

Fruit contains antioxidants, vitamins and fibre, but is also high in sugar and calories. If you want to lose weight, limit yourself to 3 portions of fruit a day, and eat more vegetables. Of course, if the choice is between chocolate and fruit, fruit wins every time!

NOT ENOUGH WATER

You don't have to drink litres and litres of expensive mineral water, but your body does need a certain amount of water in order to function (about 2.5 litres a day, half of which will come from your food, as long as you eat enough fruit and vegetables). People often mistake thirst for hunger, so if you find you are hungry when you shouldn't be, try having a drink of water before you reach for a snack. Drinking sufficient water will also help your digestion, and help prevent constipation.

LACK OF SLEEP

Sleep deprivation affects the levels of 2 hormones related to hunger: less sleep equals less leptin, which means you don't feel as full as you should when you have eaten; and too much ghrelin, which stimulates your appetite so that you want to eat more, particularly calorie-dense, high-carbohydrate foods.

GLYCAEMIC LOAD

Blood sugar rises then drops after eating – yo-yoing of it can make us crave more, and can make us gain weight more easily. One way to balance your blood sugar is to learn about the glycaemic load of food, which can indicate how fast carbohydrates and sugars in your food are released into your blood stream. The lower, and therefore the slower, the better.

YOU ARE EATING LOW-FAT FOOD

If diet food sounds too good to be true, it probably is. When manufacturers take fat out of a food, they have to do something to make it taste half-decent, and that usually means boosting the levels of sugar or salt in the product. If you look at the calorie content of low-fat biscuits, for example, it is often much the same as that of the 'normal' version. Fat also carries flavour, and our body senses when we have eaten fat which makes us feel full: low-fat versions of foods don't tend to taste as nice, and don't satisfy our bodies in the same way, so you will soon want to eat something else. And they usually contain extra sugar or salt too, as well as other additives.

ALCOHOL

Many of us think that white wine, champagne or plain vodka somehow 'don't count' when it comes to dieting. Any alcohol is anathema to weight loss. Not only is it 'empty calories', ie there is nothing nutritionally beneficial about it, but it will spike your blood sugar levels and make you hungrier – and less disciplined about what you eat as a result.

HIDDEN SUGAR

There is a lot of hidden sugar in food these days – especially ready made foods like baked beans, chutney and tomato sauce. Look for reduced sugar versions, and read the nutritional information on the labels. Be aware that fruit juices are as high in sugar as soft drinks, even though they are seen as being 'healthy': it's fine to have one glass a day – it counts as a portion of fruit – but not to drink lots.

NOT ENOUGH CARBS

It can be easy to add high-fat foods, like butter, to carbs such as bread or potatoes, but in themselves they can be a good option. Carbohydrate-based foods contain only half as many calories per gram as fat, and wholegrain cereal, bread or pasta is high in fibre also which makes them filling, and an even better choice.

STRESS

The stress hormone, cortisol, releases energy – which means your blood sugar levels get disrupted, and this then means you are more prone to storing fat and, therefore, weight gain. It also takes our mind off watching our diet and crave 'comfort' foods, making us prone to reaching for the biscuit tin.

ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS

Some artificial sweeteners are stimulants, and so act on the body in the same way as caffeine – putting you into ‘stress’ mode, so your body ends up storing fat.

Remember, these are often hidden away in ‘diet’ foods – as a replacement for sugar, and therefore, calories.

NOT ENOUGH FAT

Eating fat can be a good thing – if it is the right sort. The body needs omega-3 and omega-6 essential fatty acids for keeping every cell membrane in the body healthy, and most of us don’t have enough of them. Oily fish, such as salmon and mackerel, contain a lot of them, so try and eat some at least once a week. Nuts are also full of essential fatty acids too, and they are filling, but do keep the portions small because they are so high in calories.

HIGH COFFEE INTAKE

Lots of people increase their coffee intake as they mistakenly believe it can help you lose weight. It is, in fact, a stimulant, so may well cause weight gain as a result of blood sugar changes.