

The Gold Standard for Weight Loss and Weight Control: The Latest Research Condensed

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Losing unwanted pounds, arriving at your ideal weight and staying there is amazingly simple, yet very challenging. For almost all of us, it is entirely about calories. A recent two year study by the Harvard School of Public Health* noted that in the end diets, whether they are about grapefruits or eating all the steak you want, only worked due to calorie restriction. At some point you get bored eating all the steak you want (or whatever), and you eat less. If your net calorie consumption (calories consumed minus calories burned) is less than what your body requires for weight maintenance, you will lose weight. If your net calorie consumption is more, you will gain weight.

You may, like many, think that you have a hard time due to your low metabolism. According to the Mayo Clinic, metabolism rate (with rare exceptions) makes almost no difference in weight control. ** A pound is 3,500 calories and to lose one you need to decrease your calorie intake or increase your exercise accordingly.

Why is this so fraught with failure? It lies in three not so simple things: 1) knowledge, 2) accountability and 3) being honest with yourself.

Knowledge:

Knowledge is a key to weight control. If you truly know calories, it affects choices. You will likely consume fewer calories, as well as burn more.

New York City Mayor Bloomberg is a leader in helping attack America's obesity problem. He did it by spearheading a city law that required chain restaurants and coffeehouses such as Starbucks to post calorie information on all their products for all customers to see. When people have a low fat muffin, they may be surprised to see that it has almost the same 450 calories as the regular muffin. They also see that the large fruit cup has 90 calories. This information in plain sight affects choices. Recent studies have shown a drop of 18 to 20% in calories consumed in fast food restaurants when calories of all foods are displayed conspicuously. ***

Accountability:

Most people who go on a diet lose weight then gain it back when they end the diet. Why? They go back to their previous pattern of overeating. The outcome is obvious and inevitable. This is why diets seldom work for very long. An article in The Wall Street Journal discussed who is most likely to keep off the weight lost during a diet. By comparing different strategies, it reported that the most successful people weighed themselves every day. What they did was hold themselves accountable. They couldn't ignore their success or failure. It was in their face every day, and they got immediate and accurate feedback.

To be accountable and accurate about calories consumed, the process is simple. After lunch, write down all you have eaten in a small notebook or log you can carry with you. Put down the calorie content next to everything you just ate. At bedtime, do the same thing for everything you ate for the rest of the day. Then add up the day's total calories. At first, you may need to carry a small calorie count booklet until you begin to know what the calorie content is for what you are eating. For the rest of your life, you will be a better informed calorie eater.

There is some good news. You get to subtract calories burned from calories consumed to get to the true barometer: net calories consumed. If you exercise, you enhance your health and make weight loss and weight maintenance much easier. To measure calories burned, there is a pretty easy method made popular by former Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson. He called it “10,000 Steps a Day for Health”. The measurement tool is simple: a pedometer. Mr. Thompson was a cheerleader for getting America moving and healthier. If you were to walk 10,000 steps a day or approximately five miles, your health and waistline would improve significantly. What makes calorie burning easy to measure is that moving one mile (approximately 2,000 steps) by running, walking or moseying burns about 100 calories. **** It doesn’t matter how fast, only how far. You can exercise in any weather by just walking extra at a mall or even in the aisles of a grocery store.

Honesty:

To determine how many calories you need to “net” a day to lose a half a pound, a pound or two pounds a week, we have Steve Jobs to thank. On the iPhone or iPad, the best app I have found to help is called “Lose It” which costs less than a dollar. You enter your goals, ideal weight, how long you want to take to get there, etc. and it tells you how many calories to consume a day to meet those goals (for us that means “net” calories).

The Gold Standard of Weight Loss looks like this:

Date	Morning Weight	Calories Consumed	Day’s Steps	Calories Burned	Net calories
3/10/2010	142	2,200	12,000	600	1,600
3/11/2010	142	2,000	14,000	700	1,300

The good news is that once you have become accustomed to recording all this information, it only takes one to two minutes of your time daily. It is best to do this forever to maintain your ideal weight. It keeps you accountable to yourself. It is so easy to slide back into bad habits without a “food sheriff” to watch over you. Another benefit to this program is mindfulness. All this makes you more thoughtful and honest about what you are putting in your mouth helping you stop and think before you eat. Is it a calorie bargain or is it a bad calorie deal? Is that 700 calorie slice of pecan pie a better deal than the 90 calorie fruit cup or sherbet? You might just walk by that plate of donuts at the office, knowing each crème filled costs you 500 calories. You can become an expert food shopper in terms of calories.

There are a myriad of psychological, emotional and social reasons for overeating which of course need to be addressed. However, in the end weight loss and weight maintenance is all about calories. If you want to lose weight and control it over time, just remember that nothing tastes as good fitness feels.

* February 26, 2009 *New England Journal of Medicine*

** 2010 *Metabolism and Weight Control...and Slow Metabolism: Is it to Blame for Weight Control?*
MayoClinic.com

*** August 10, 2010 *Study: Calorie Count on Fast-food Menus Gives Diners Pause*, Nanci Hellmich, USA Today.com

**** October 24, 2007 *Burning Calories: How to Walk for Weight Control*, Nancy Baumgardner, About.com, reviewed by Medical Review Board

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