



# CUT DOWN TO SIZE

ENJOY THE TREATS YOU CRAVE AND MAINTAIN A HEALTHY FIGURE. ALL IT TAKES IS A FEW SMALL CHANGES. BY KATRINA LAWRENCE

**W**hen it comes to controlling and balancing our diets, most of us know the trade-offs. No matter how you cut it, every wafer-thin biscotti counts. It's one thing to knowingly pay the price of extra kilojoules for that 4pm Mars bar, but what about the hidden costs of day-to-day eating; those unwitting extra serves or sips throughout the day that don't seem to pack the kilojoule punch that obvious diet dangers do? Therein lies the real threat. Over time, a sneaky extra kilojoule here or there can amount to one big fat problem.

"If you consume an additional 500 kilojoules a day, that roughly translates into a five-kilogram weight gain over the course of a year," says Lisa R Young, nutritionist and author of *The Portion Teller: Smartsize Your Way To Permanent Weight Loss* (\$36.95, Morgan Road Books). "And the trouble is, it's easy to do. You may think you're being healthy and ordering a salad, but the dressing alone may tip you over." Those 500 kilojoules add up when you consider that a sedentary office worker may only use about 9,000 kilojoules per day.

If the thought that you may be your own worst diet enemy is enough to make you reach for the Tim Tams, wait. "By making changes like ordering dressing on the side, you could lose five kilograms a year," says Young. You'll be pleasantly surprised to learn just how effortless other waistline-taming strategies are. Who said you can't teach an old diet new tricks? →



## mistake 1 portion inflation

You can go to the extreme length of buying gadgets to clip on your teeth that enforce small bites or adopt Liz Hurley's trick of eating with baby-size cutlery to curb gulping tendencies. But that's missing the big picture – we're loading too much onto our plates in the first place.

In this all-you-can-eat world, studies consistently show the more food that's placed in front of a person, the more they will eat. According to Young, inflated portion size is the main reason for weight problems. Even if it's only a few kilograms you need to budge, poor portion perspective can stop you reaching your ideal size.

Recent US research proved the point. The government-funded study (did somebody say obesity epidemic?) found that smaller portions induced the greatest weight loss in overweight people. While there were other factors at play – such as eating more fresh vegetables and fruit, and increasing exercise – those who could most successfully maintain portion control enjoyed the greatest weight-loss.

So, before you change what you eat, consider *how much* you eat. "If you eat too much of anything, you will put on weight," says Joanna McMillan-Price, a Sydney nutrition scientist and fitness leader. "It's best to eat a smaller portion of real food than a bigger portion of a processed low-fat or low-carb food," she says.

Which brings us back to the diet mantra our grandmothers espoused: everything in moderation. Nutritionists, of course, always point out that there was no obesity problem in our grandparents' day. One reason we can't fit into our nana's frocks, says Young, is that we're eating out more than ever. "We used to spend about 25 per cent of our food budget on food

prepared outside the home back in the '70s," she says. "We're now spending nearly half."

That means we're not only losing control of exactly what we're eating, but we're most likely eating bigger serves than we would if we were cooking at home. Then there are pre-meal extras, such as a bread basket and bruschetta, and a rich tiramisu to finish.

While the social aspect of food is important, if you're aiming to take control of your waistline, you'll need to commit to preparing more meals yourself. McMillan-Price suggests avoiding those all-you-can-eat buffets and learning appropriate serving sizes. For example, one serving of meat is about the size of a deck of cards and one of pasta is about one and a half cups.

If your food comes in a packet or jar, it's also wise to check the suggested servings count on the label. "What may look like a single serving may actually be twice that, so you're getting a lot of kilojoules," says Young. "You need to look at the serving size, then how many servings are in the package, then do the maths." In terms of snack foods, many now come in single-serve sizes. Or there's always that one perfect Lindt ball.

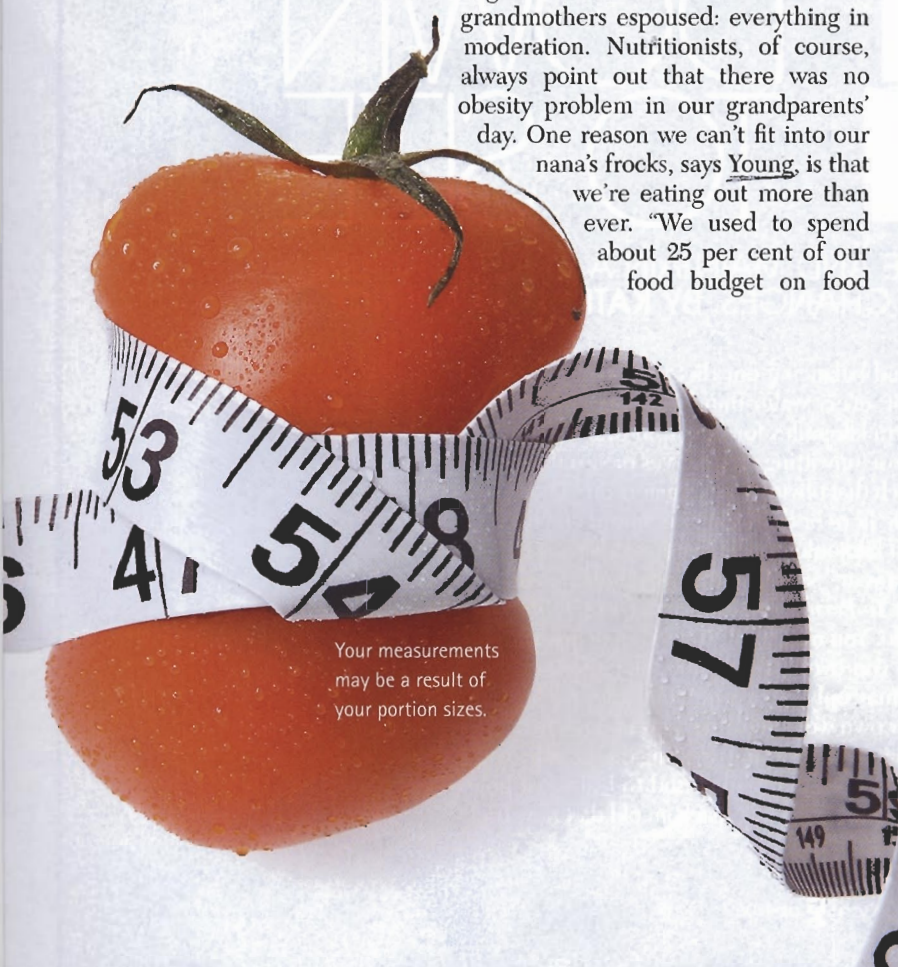
## mistake 2 falling for fat-free

There's no such thing as a free lunch – and there's no such thing as a fat-free one, either. So, you ask, why do so many food products make such slender claims? The answer: read the fine print. "These products say they're fat-free, they don't say they have no kilojoules," says Young. "It's not the labelling that's the problem – it's our interpretation. A product may not contain fat, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have calories. It may be loaded with sugar, for example. Anything can convert to fat if you consume too much of it."

So if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. "If it says it's low-this or low-that, that means it's probably high in something else," says Young, who recommends good ol' kilojoule-counting as the best way to keep your weight in check.

Reading labels is crucial in the quest for taking control of your weight. However, Young points out that many of the best fat-free foods don't have any labels at all. "There are naturally fat-free foods, like lettuce, spinach and fruits, which contain essential fibre and other nutrients," she notes. "Then there are those foods that are fat-free, like liquorice and jellybeans, but you can get fat eating too many of them. An apple and apple-flavoured jellybeans are both fat-free, but clearly there's a huge difference in why you would pick one over the other."

Don't let all the fat-free fuss take you away from the fact that it's always better to eat a little bit of the good than too much of the bad. That's especially the case when it comes to what are known as the "good" fats – the naturally occurring, unprocessed types found in salmon, nuts, avocado and olive oil. "We actually need fat in order to reach satiety," explains Julia Ross, a nutritional psychology expert and author of *The Diet Cure* (\$29.95, Viking).



Your measurements may be a result of your portion sizes.



"We may not be physically satisfied by our meal unless there's a certain amount of high-quality fat in it. Fat triggers the release of endorphins, which give us that rewarded, satisfied feeling. When we don't get that signal, we don't stop eating."

## mistake 3 fluid faults

Just because you're not chewing, doesn't mean you're not clocking up the kilojoules. Sounds obvious, but think about how much liquid you mindlessly guzzle during the course of a day. There's the morning cup of coffee (or two). Sure, you might opt for skim-milk as the low-fat option, but you could still be downing as many as 1,200 kilojoules. And if you have a what-the-heck-I'll-have-an-extra-large-latte moment? "You could be consuming up to 3,360 kilojoules," says Young. "And that's just before breakfast!"

Then there's the diet soft drink you smugly sip with your salad at lunchtime. Well, wipe that smile off your face – a recent study found that the more diet soft drinks people drank, the greater their chance of excess weight. What's more, diet drinkers gained more weight over the eight-year test period than those who opted for the regular versions.

One theory to explain this is that artificial sweeteners may boost appetite. Certainly, recent research in the US (Purdue University, Indiana) suggested this was the case. Ross agrees that artificial sweeteners can throw the appetite out of whack. "Artificial sweeteners raise blood sugar levels, which stimulates an insulin release," she explains. "And what happens after an insulin release is that the insulin pulls all the blood sugar out of the bloodstream. When you have a low-blood-sugar attack, your body craves a carbohydrate hit."

The other theory is that diet formulas may lure drinkers into a kind of false sense of security, by rationalising the over-consumption of kilojoules in other foods. "I don't believe diet products do anything to help you lose weight," says Young. "Because you end up consuming more of them, or you'll drink a diet cola, but have it with a chocolate bar."

Other drinks you might want to avoid are more obvious. Namely, alcohol. Young points out that we're drinking more because we're eating out more – and many restaurants have super-sized their wine glasses, so it's easy to exceed your two-glasses-max pledge. This is especially the case if you have an over-eager wine-pourer at hand. Ross and Young both recommend limiting yourself to one glass of wine, although Young suggests ordering a white wine spritzer. And if you can't quite bring yourself to commit such semillon sacrilege, you might want to consider an alcohol hiatus for a while. It will immediately cut out a chunk of kilojoules from your intake, plus it may help maintain a strong healthy-eating commitment. "It's a scientific fact that when you drink, you're less discriminating about what you eat," says Ross. So, if you have an inkling those midnight kebabs may be part of your can't-lose-weight problem, you know what to do.

EVEN IF IT'S ONLY A FEW KILOGRAMS YOU NEED TO BUDGE, POOR PORTION PERSPECTIVE CAN STOP YOU REACHING YOUR IDEAL SIZE

## mistake 4 auto-pilot eating

Nutritionists agree that ever since the diet industry ballooned, so have our waistlines. There are several theories. But one, made famous by Mireille Guiliano in *French Women Don't Get Fat* (\$23.95, Vintage) is that controlling your appetite depends as much on the emotional as the physical satisfaction of the act of eating. Her advice for staying slim is to eat what you enjoy – again, just do it in moderation.

Finding pleasure and satisfaction in food can be hard when you've spent years obsessing over your weight. And, for those who have opted for diet versions of food, rather than a little less of the real thing, there might actually be a scientific explanation for why you're not reaching your goals.

To return to the Purdue University research, it seems that artificial sweeteners may actually have a physiological effect on appetite. "Without thinking about it, the body learns that it can use food characteristics – such as sweetness and viscosity – to gauge caloric intake," researcher Terry Davidson explains. But when substitute ingredients are added, "the body's natural ability to regulate food intake (and thus body weight) may be weakened as this natural relationship is impaired by artificial sweeteners".

So, one key to successful dieting must be getting in touch with our taste buds. Many nutritionists say we have lost a connection with knowing what food satisfies us. We rely on quick fixes and take-away – we spend less time shopping for fresh ingredients, less time cooking nutritious, naturally tasty meals and sitting down to savour every mouthful.

Some people, however, may find it harder than others to rediscover their enjoyment of food. →





Research has found that the way we register taste and flavour may have some bearing on our weight. While "supertasters" – those people with the most sensitive tastebuds – have the healthiest body mass index, the group known as "non-tasters" are most likely to be obese. The thinking is that non-tasters overeat because they sense less fat and flavour in their food and are not as easily satisfied as other eaters. If you have dulled tastebuds, you should intensify the flavour of foods with sauces, mustards and vinegars.

## mistake 5 the exercise trap

Do you almost outrun the treadmill every morning then pat yourself on the sweaty back for your efforts? Sorry to be the bearer of bad news ... A Canadian study recently found that intense morning exercise may not be a fast-track to weight loss. Those people who did high-intensity workouts consumed an average of 51 per cent more kilojoules throughout the day than those who exercised for longer at a lower intensity. So, they were consuming all – or more – of the kilojoules they had burned off.

The authors of the study proffered that high-intensity exercise depletes the body of glucose, which can activate your appetite. Ross agrees. "Unless you're eating really carefully, it's very hard to maintain your blood sugar after a workout," she says. "What's more, most people don't like to eat before their morning exercise, so they tend to be ravenous afterwards."

To avoid post-workout bingeing, Ross suggests drinking a protein smoothie before hitting the gym. "It's critical that you have adequate protein available when you exercise," she explains. Ross's recipe: coconut milk, whey or rice protein powder, fresh fruit and a little water or ice.

Young, on the other hand, believes that the reason many gym-goers may not be achieving their desired weight is that they're looking at exercise as a ticket to eat more. "If you exercise and then eat more, you're going to be back in the same place," she says.

Furthermore, Young points out that cardiovascular activity, even the very intense variety, may not burn as many kilojoules as you believe. Just think about the kilojoule counters on cardio machines – and how they never clock up as much as

you feel you've deserved. That doesn't mean they're not beneficial – just that cardio exercise is most effective when employed together with controlled kilojoule consumption.

Eating whole fruit is much more beneficial to your health than juice.

## mistake 6 fruitless efforts

There's a juice bar on every corner, each with an endless line of thirsty customers. You'd think a fresh juice a day would be a good thing, but, says Ross, "You'd be wrong. Our tendency to drink fruit juices instead of eating real fruit is a significant contributor to our weight-gain epidemic." Not only do juices have high levels of sugar (albeit natural), they also steer juice-junkies away from the benefits of eating the real thing.

A 2004 study showed that eating real fruit helped people maintain weight. Why? It's all about the fibre factor. "Fibre aids in the feeling of being full," says Young, who notes that fruits with skins – such as apples and dried apricots – tend to have the highest fibre levels. "You're getting a lot of water from real fruit, which helps [give a feeling of fullness]. And then, of course, you're also getting plenty of vitamins and minerals. It's a win-win situation."

Ross recommends taking fruit to work so you have a healthy option come snack-attack time, and aren't tempted to head for the vending machine. While some people find fresh fruit too tricky to eat, Ross advises to buy your produce as needed – you don't ever have to encounter a mushy banana again. "Most fruit stands prepare beautiful little containers of sliced fruit, so you can get a mango one day, berries the next," says Ross, who promotes eating a rainbow-coloured array of fruit in order to reap the best antioxidant benefits.

## mistake 7 lacking protein

With all the talk of low-fat this and low-carb that, it's easy to forget the importance of protein. That's not to say the diet pendulum has to swing to high-protein, just a balanced approach to all food groups. It's important to re-introduce protein into your eating plan if you have a history of frequent dieting. "The brain is designed to generate normal appetite for traditional healthy foods," says Ross. "But when the brain has been starved of protein it will create uncontrollable cravings for sweets and starches."

Switching sweets for more protein isn't such a bad deal when you consider that protein comes in so many delicious guises. Of course, there's the obvious lean meat, but also think omelettes – a particularly great choice as eating eggs at breakfast can reduce hunger and kilojoule intake for the next 24 hours – or throw some chickpeas into your salad. Another protein-enhancing idea: sprinkle seeds and nuts over your veggies.

Nutritionists recommend protein as the key to satisfying, sustaining snacks. Young recommends yoghurt and fruit, a bean soup, or raw veggies and hummus, while Ross suggests a mix of cheese and nuts. Dairy-based protein seems to be a particularly effective diet-friendly food, with recent Danish research suggesting that a high-calcium eating regimen helps promote fat excretion. Now that's enough to make you really smile and say cheese. **m**