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Small changes

This year, try nibbling away at those unhealthy habits. What have you got to lose?

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This will be the year you get serious, right?

Maybe a more novel approach is the key to weight loss success in 2007. Instead of the sweeping overhaul such as knocking out fried food for 365 days, institute small changes that are easy to live with, but that cumulatively can have significant and lasting effects on your health. And your waist size.

"People hate to admit the fact that it took them 10 years, 20 years, 30 years to get from a size they are comfortable with to a size they are miserable with," says Jeanne Goldberg, a professor of nutrition science at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy. "They want to turn that around in 10 minutes," she says. "That's totally unachievable."

Begin here

It helps to equate food with physical activity. A new book by nutrition expert Charles Stuart Platkin, *The Diet Detective's Count Down*, lists thousands of foods and how long it takes to burn them off by walking, running, biking, swimming, dancing and doing yoga.

That glazed Krispy Kreme is less tempting when you know you have to add almost an hour of walking to your day to counteract it.

Knowing what to change in your diet also is easier when you know what your habits are. Most people wildly underestimate how much food they eat. That's why Platkin urges people to keep a food diary for several days before attempting any changes.

Food journal. Keep track of all those spare nibbles and you'll stay honest. It's hard to forget that extra handful of chips when it's written in black-and-white. With a few days tracked, it's easier to find less painful ways to trim.

Look at beverages. Swapping out even just one high-calorie drink a day can have a remarkable effect. Consider diet drinks or water as substitutes.

"Over a year, that 100 calories a day is a 10-pound weight loss," says Leah McLaughlin, an editor at Prevention magazine.

Smoothies, which often masquerade as health food, are another dangerous drink. The sugar in all that fruit adds up quickly. Goldberg suggests diluting them with water, using skim milk instead of whole and adding fat-free dried milk for creaminess with fewer calories. And don't forget the cream in your coffee, especially the fancy coffees (some of which pack hundreds of calories). Try halving the sugar or switching to skim milk. Once you get used to that, try doing both.

Snack attack. Snacks are another area where people don't realize how much they eat, often involving foods with lots of calories and little nutrition. Rather than trying to skip snacks, think of them as small meals, says McLaughlin. That will make you less likely to grab a candy bar and more likely to eat something not only healthier, but more filling. And that means you're less likely to snack again later.

Fruit as a snack can be problematic. A large apple isn't one serving; it's two or three. Pick smaller pieces. That goes for other snacks, too. Though prepackaged single servings of snacks such as popcorn and cookies cost more, the dietary benefit is worth the price, Goldberg says.

Meals are challenging. Begin by battling the portion distortion that results in hundreds of excess calories. Using smaller plates (try salad plates, which are the size of dinner plates from 20 or 30 years ago) helps limit how food much can be piled on.

Planning is key. A few minutes spent determining the week's meals means you never have to come home and wonder what's for dinner. And that makes it more difficult to turn to takeout.

Rethink how you construct your meals. Most people build the meal around a main course (usually meat), says McLaughlin. Instead, start with the vegetables and whole grains, then add a protein to that.

Added one at a time, these changes don't seem like much. And that's the point. For them to become part of your lifestyle, healthy changes have to be so easy you don't even need to think about them. "This will not be a rapid weight loss," says Platkin. "You'll make these changes, you won't mind, and you'll say suddenly, 'Oh my gosh. I lost weight and I didn't do anything.' But you did."

Fast Facts: Source: *The Portion Teller Plan* by Lisa Young (Morgan Road Books)

Size matters

In December we play, in January we pay. Here's a handy guide to help get portions under control.

- Checkbook = 3 ounces of white fish such as flounder, sole or red snapper
- Deck of cards = 3 ounces meat or poultry
- Walnut = 2 tablespoons peanut butter
- Postage stamp = 1 teaspoon butter
- Baseball = 1 cup
- CD = 1 pancake or waffle
- Computer mouse = baked potato
- 4 dice = 1 ounce hard cheese
- Golf ball = 1/4 cup of mixed nuts or dried fruit

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