

**W**hen it comes to trimming down, counting your calories used to be the go-to plan. Thankfully, a new era of research has been steadily pounding nails into this antiquated calorie-counting coffin. Case in point: A study by researchers at the Stanford University School of Medicine found that people who cut back on added sugar, refined grains and highly processed foods while eating more whole foods without worrying about counting calories or limiting portion sizes lost significant amounts of weight over the course of a year. And a *New England Journal of Medicine* investigation showed that people whose diets included more servings of junk food, potato-sweetened drinks and red/processed meats gained weight during four-year intervals while those who ate more vegetables, fruits, nuts, whole grains and yogurt were protected from creeping weight gain – regardless of calorie intake.



# numbers crunchin'

USE THESE SEVEN STRATEGIES TO KICK THE CALORIE-COUNTING HABIT ONCE AND FOR ALL.



get

*By Matthew Kadey, MS, RD*



# L by the num

This is not to say that calories don't matter in the battle of the bulge; they do. But those 100 calories from bologna are not the same as 100 calories from broccoli, and the number of calories in a food absolutely does not indicate its healthfulness.

"People would be better served by shifting their priorities away from counting calories and toward improving diet quality and eating habits," says Lisa R. Young, Ph.D., RDN, author of *Finally Full, Finally Slim: 30 Days to Permanent Weight Loss One Portion at a Time* (Center Street, 2019).

"Not only can calorie counting be tedious and inaccurate, it doesn't give the full picture."

Dump those tired calorie-counting apps and instead use these body-benefiting metrics to get your fit on.

## 1 Focus on Fiber

**YOUR GOAL: 25-PLUS GRAMS PER DAY**

Researchers at the University of Massachusetts found that simply focusing on eating a higher-fiber diet is just as effective for weight loss as following a set diet plan. "Fiber is found in foods that are relatively low in calories," Young says. "It also fills you up, so it's a weight-loss win-win."

More reason to rough it: An investigation in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* showed that consuming more fiber improves your microbiome — for example, the levels of beneficial bacteria in your gut — and a robust microbiome has been linked to everything from better digestion to improved mental health. Yet despite these results, dietary surveys show that more than 90 percent of American adults don't get enough daily fiber.

If you're among the fiber-fraught, look into some legumes: Just 1 cup of beans offers 15 grams of fiber, which brings you more than halfway toward your daily goal of 25 grams. Other fiber-friendly foods include vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts and seeds.

## 2 The Chew

**YOUR GOAL: 20 TO 30 PERCENT FEWER BITES**

It sounds too simple to be legit, but a Brigham Young University study found that people who counted their daily food bites and sips of non-water liquid and then committed to taking 20 to 30 percent fewer food bites and sips were successful at shedding several pounds over the course of a month — without making any other changes to their diet or exercise routine. "Counting bites slows down your food intake, which helps you eat more mindfully and better notice your body's satiety signals," Young notes. In other words, you're less likely to eat and drink more than you actually need if you monitor how often you bring fork to mouth.

Want to try it? Simply count the number of bites of food or gulps of liquid other than water you take over the period of a week. Take the average and reduce that number by 20 to 30 percent per day to hit your goal. For example, if you average 120 bites/sips a day, you'd reduce that to 100 bites/sips daily.

## 3 Pumped-Up Protein

**YOUR GOAL: 20 TO 30 GRAMS PER MEAL**

The recommended amount of protein for active women is roughly 1.5 grams for every kilogram of bodyweight to support the repair and creation of muscles while keeping your appetite in check. The latest science also indicates that when you eat it is as important as how much you eat: Instead of consuming your daily protein quota at a single meal,

distribute it more evenly throughout the day. A study in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* showed that muscle protein synthesis increased when people consumed 30 grams of protein in a meal (about 5 ounces of chicken breast) and that taking in more than that didn't bring about bigger gains. Remember that additional calories of any kind — protein, fat or carbs — will be stored as body fat.

To cover the spread, look over your weekly meal plan and include a protein with each and every meal and snack. Chicken, fish, Greek yogurt, legumes and eggs are all great options.

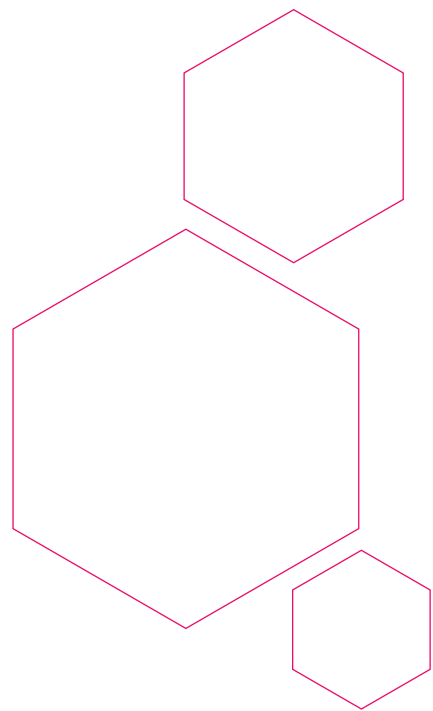
## 4 Don't Dine Out

**YOUR GOAL: 3 OR FEWER MEALS PER AWAY FROM HOME PER WEEK**

An *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* study found that adults who ate out more frequently consumed less nutritious diets and had higher food expenses, and a *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* study showed that women who ate lunch out at least once a week lost an average of 5 fewer pounds over the course of a year than those who brown-bagged it more often. Furthermore, women who consume lots of fast food may be more likely to experience infertility than women who rarely, if ever, eat fast-food meals, suggest researchers from the University of Adelaide in Australia.

"While it's hard to eat healthy if you're always eating out, it's also difficult to eat poorly if you're cooking for yourself using mostly whole-food ingredients," Young explains.

To reduce your weekly dining-out habit, plan a week's worth of healthy meals and snacks, and then carve out some time to batch-cook your fare. Takeout is way less tempting when you've got a tasty homemade meal to nosh.



## 5 Volumize Your Vegetables

**YOUR GOAL: 3 CUPS DAILY**

Most nutrition maxims come and go, but the push to eat more veggies will never wane. Beyond reducing the risk for nearly every disease under the sun, a large review of studies published in the journal *Nutrients* showed that women who eat more daily servings of vegetables tend to have slimmer waistlines and do a better job at staving off weight creep.

"When you eat more veggies, it tends to crowd out other higher-calorie foods in your diet to help with weight management," says Marni Sumbal, MS, RD, author of *Essential Sports Nutrition: A Guide to Optimal Performance for Every Active Person* (Rockridge Press, 2018). "And their added fiber will slow down digestion, which promotes satiety to help put the brakes on overeating." Unfortunately, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 1 in 10 Americans are eating the daily recommended 2 to 3 cups of vegetables.

Infuse all your meals and snacks with veggies to ensure you hit your optimal intake: Add shredded carrots to your morning oatmeal, dig into a big green salad for lunch and toss around a veggie-laden stir-fry for dinner. Frozen vegetables are a convenient and budget-friendly way to work more into everything from soups to smoothies.

## 6 Slash Added Sugar

**YOUR GOAL: LESS THAN 40 GRAMS (10 TEASPOONS) DAILY**

Studies show that people who eat too much added sugar (extra sweet stuff added in as opposed to that naturally present) face an increased risk for conditions such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease — not to mention unwanted belly flab — and those sugar spikes and crashes can leave you feeling haggard. "There's a very different reaction in the body when foods with naturally occurring sugar are consumed like fruit and dairy as compared to foods such as cookies that are heavily processed with added sugar," Sumbal says.

Chances are you're overloading on sugar without even knowing it; various sugar aliases are pumped into nearly everything, from ketchup to salad dressing to almond butter. And so-called "natural sugars" such as added honey and coconut sugar do not get a free pass: They too count toward your daily added sugar allotment.

Thankfully, a new nutrition label calls out the grams of added sugar, making it way easier to keep tabs on your intake of the sweet stuff. Limit your intake to less than 6 to 12 teaspoons (24 to 48 grams) per day. Swap out products that list higher amounts of added sugar like flavored yogurt and granola with low- to no-sugar-added alternatives, such as plain yogurt and unsweetened muesli.

## 7 Beware of the Booze

**YOUR GOAL: FEWER THAN 3 DRINKS PER WEEK**

The research against alcohol is bulletproof: A 2018 study from the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing found that people who abstained from alcohol were more successful at dropping pounds during a four-year lifestyle intervention program. And a report in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* showed that women who drink heavily when they're younger have a higher risk of becoming overweight as they age. What's more, researchers at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis found that consuming one to two alcoholic drinks more than three times a week raises the risk for dying earlier — especially from cancer — by about 20 percent because alcohol is broken down in the body into the carcinogenic compound acetaldehyde.

"When you drink, the liver is forced to metabolize the alcohol instead of fat, which may increase fat accumulation around the midsection," Sumbal says. She adds that people often overlook the calories in booze (and sweet mixers), which can really add up over the course of a week. Factor in the lowered inhibitions when you get your buzz on, which make you more likely to mindlessly munch, and you could be in deep doo-doo.

You don't have to totally swear off cheering in the weekend with your gal pals, but be smarter about imbibing: Trim a drink or two from your weekly routine, pour yourself smaller servings, and order cocktails made with soda water and wedges of whole fruit. 🍷