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Is Your Diet Making You Gain

Why some weight loss strategies backfire--and the fixes that help you reach your goal

By [Karen Ansel, RD](#)

If you're trying to [slim down](#), you've probably amassed a menu full of calorie-cutting tips and tricks. So it may come as a shock to learn that many of the ones you've sworn by are actually keeping you fat. "In their quest to [lose weight](#), many women unknowingly sabotage themselves," says Elisa Zied, RD, an American Dietetic Association spokesperson and author of *Feed Your Family Right!* Here, six well-intentioned approaches to [weight loss](#) that can go awry, and the expert and research-proven ways to drop pounds for good.

You save your calories for a big dinner

Yes, cutting total [calories](#) leads to [weight loss](#). But bank most of those [calories](#) for the end of the day and your [hunger](#) hormones will go haywire, making you eat more. Middle-aged men and women who ate their daily number of [calories](#) in one supersize supper produced more ghrelin, a hormone that causes [hunger](#), than when they ate the same number of calories in three square meals, found researchers at the National Institute on Aging.

Smarter move: Front-load your calories. Overeating at night keeps you from being hungry in the morning, setting off a vicious cycle in which you're never interested in breakfast but always starving by dinner. The key is to rebalance your day so you don't set yourself up for an evening binge. To get your appetite back in the morning, cut your evening meal in half. Then eat a breakfast of about 450 calories, such as a scrambled egg with low-fat [cheese](#) on a whole [wheat](#) English muffin with an 8-ounce glass of juice--an amount that should keep you satisfied until lunch, says George L. Blackburn, MD, PhD, associate director of the division of nutrition at Harvard Medical School and author of *Break Through Your Set Point*. Once your appetite adjusts, don't go more than 5 hours without another meal of roughly the same size.

You graze instead of eating regularly scheduled meals

Trouble is, eating in this manner may contribute to weight gain, according to a 2005 *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* study. When researchers asked women to eat at regular, fixed times or to break their usual amount of food into unscheduled meals throughout the day, they made a startling discovery: The women actually burned more [calories](#) in the 3 hours after eating the regular meals than they did after the unplanned meals. They produced less insulin, too, potentially lowering their odds of insulin resistance, which is linked to weight gain and [obesity](#). What's more, grazing instead of planning ahead can set you up to eat mindlessly, says Zied. In the end, we rarely realize how many [calories](#) all those little nibbles and noshes really add up to.

Smarter move: Figure out how many times a day you need to eat--everybody is different--and then stick to a schedule. "It's not great to feel starved, but it is okay to feel slightly hungry," says Zied. You can home in on your body's internal cues with a food diary. It's so effective that earlier this year, researchers at Kaiser Permanente Center for [Health Research](#) found that dieters who kept a food journal lost twice as much weight as those who didn't record what they ate.

You assume calories from healthy, natural foods are low

People consistently underestimate the [calories](#) in nutritious items such as [yogurt](#), fish, and baked [chicken](#), found researchers at Bowling Green State University who quizzed students on calorie counts. "Just because a food is [healthy](#) doesn't mean you can eat big portions," says D. Milton Stokes, MPH, RD, owner of One Source Nutrition in Stamford, CT. "A handful of [nuts](#) can be 200 [calories](#) or more. And if you add that without cutting back elsewhere, it could be the reason you're not losing weight."

Smarter move: Count *all* [calories](#). Once you learn that 1/2 cup of cereal can have as much as 200 calories or that there are about 220 calories in that "single-serving" bottle of OJ, you'll be more prudent about how much you use.

You eat like a bird for the month leading up to a big event such as a class reunion

Slashing significant [calories](#) might sound like the fast track to weight loss, but it's likely to backfire. In fact, [nutrition experts](#) recommend you don't dip below 1,200 to 1,500 [calories](#) a day. "If you [crash diet](#) for more than 2 weeks or so, your metabolism will temporarily slow down," says Blackburn. "So the same exact dieting effort results in less and less weight loss." The reason: Your body is conserving energy to keep you from losing weight too quickly. And that's not all. When you drastically cut [calories](#), you lose muscle along with fat--especially if you haven't been exercising. Because muscle is your body's calorie-burning furnace, this can slow down your metabolism, even long after your [crash diet](#) is done.

Smarter move: Aim to shed about a pound a week--the slow, steady weight loss ensures you [lose fat](#), not muscle. "If you want to drop 10 pounds, get started 10 weeks before your goal, not 4," says Blackburn. "You'll have a better chance of actually taking off the weight permanently." To drop a pound a week, shave 250 calories from your diet and burn an extra 250 calories through [exercise](#) each day. Visit prevention.com/myhealthtrackers to log your progress.

You set short-term weight-loss goals

The National Weight Control Registry estimates that only 20% of dieters successfully keep off lost weight for more than a year. That's because after we reach our goal, we let old eating habits creep back in. But people who win at [weight loss](#) consistently eat the same way even after they've slimmed down. In fact, the NWCR found that dieters who maintain their [healthy eating](#) habits every single day are 1 1/2 times more likely to maintain their [weight loss](#) in the long run than those who relax their [diets](#) on the weekends.

Smarter move: Think of [healthy eating](#) as a work in progress, not as a "diet" with a beginning and an end. The key: making small changes you can maintain so they become long-term habits. Start by creating a list of problem areas in your diet, then tackle them one at a time. For example, if you snack on a heaping handful of Oreos every night before bed, set a goal of having two instead of six, and cut back by one a day. Once you've made that a habit, pat yourself on the back and move on to your next goal.

Your splurge foods are "low-fat" and "sugar-free"

Research suggests that when a food is described as a [diet food](#), we're subconsciously primed to eat more--even if it's actually as caloric as regular food. When Cornell University researchers offered the same M&M's candies labeled either *regular* or low-fat to visitors at a university open house, visitors ate 28% more of the "low-fat" snacks. While less fat does not mean fewer calories, people make the assumption that it does, setting them up to overeat, say scientists. Smarter move: First, check food labels: So-called [diet foods](#) frequently don't save you calories. Take low-fat chocolate chip cookies--because they've been infused with extra carbs to add flavor, you save only 3 calories per cookie. Once you have that reality check, follow the golden rule for any food: Keep close tabs on portions. Limit yourself to two small cookies, for example, or trade in a bowl of [frozen yogurt](#) for a kid's-size scoop; measure out condiments such as low-fat [sour cream](#) or low-fat ranch dressing. And remember--if you prefer the flavor of full-fat foods, you'll still [lose weight](#) if you watch your portion sizes.

Last Update: 12/14/2008

Issue Date: February 2009 Copyright 2009, Prevention