

Breaking Through a Weight Loss Plateau

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If you have ever felt frustrated by a stubborn scale in spite of your efforts to shed extra pounds, you're not alone. Many people who begin a weight loss regimen may see impressive results at first, only to experience a weight loss plateau after a few weeks.

If you feel like your rate of weight loss has slowed despite your sticking to your plan, take a closer look at your eating and exercise routine. The following list may help you to pinpoint where you are a star, and where you may be falling short in your efforts.

- **Keep a food diary.** Write down everything you eat and drink for one week. Be sure to note what the food was, how much you ate, where you ate, and your level of hunger (on a scale of 1-10). Look for extra snacks, “tiny tastes”, and larger than usual portions to see if you may be eating more calories than you think.

Remember that one pound of fat equals 3500 calories. In order to lose weight, you have to make sure that you are burning more calories than you are consuming; put more simply, “calories in” should be less than “calories out”. Roughly one pound per week is considered a safe rate of weight loss, as this will promote fat loss rather than water or lean muscle tissue. In order to lose weight, you need to create a caloric deficit of about 500 calories per day. Ideally, you should do this through a combination exercise (about 250 calories) and eating less (about 250 calories).

Use your food diary to ask yourself questions such as “How much food do I actually eat? How often do I eat when I am not hungry? What is my mood when I eat?” If you find that you are eating when you are not hungry, or in response to emotions (such as anxiety, boredom or stress), then this may be an area to work on in your eating habits.

- **Don't skip meals.** Many dieters sabotage their efforts by thinking that if they “save calories” in the morning they will get a jump start on weight loss. That thinking couldn't be farther from the truth. Research shows that breakfast eaters tend to be thinner and have a lower disease risk than those who shun the first meal of the day. Skipping breakfast can set you up to ravenous later on, and you will be much less likely to reach for healthy choices if you are reeling from hunger.

For a winning breakfast, try to have something that's high in whole grains, moderate in protein and low in fat, such as a piece of whole grain toast with a tablespoon of peanut butter and a glass of skim milk, or a lowfat yogurt sprinkled with granola and fresh fruit. For those non-conventional risers, a bowl of noodle soup or a turkey pita are also winning starts.



- **Check your exercise plan.** What's your exercise strategy? A combination of strength training and cardio is the best way to burn calories and boost metabolic rate. Strength training exercise such as weight lifting has been shown to increase lean muscle tissue, which is a great way to keep your metabolism humming as you age.

If you haven't changed your routine in awhile (say, you've been walking about 30 minutes per for 5 years), then it may well be that your body has gotten “used” to using those muscles in that way; try to vary your routine to use other muscles. See the American College of Sports Medicine website for specific recommendations regarding exercise, and always check with your physician before starting any exercise program).
- **What's your body comp?** The scale can be misleading when it comes to weight, because muscle weighs more than fat. So while you may not see any change in the scale, you are still losing fat and building muscle. The good news, though, is that muscle is a much leaner tissue than fat, so that you will still lose inches, you just won't see a dip in the scale. If you belong to a gym, have a fitness professional check your body fat percentage for you, or try to attend a local health fair where they are offering this service.
- **Do you really need to lose?** If all that stands between you and eternal happiness is “those last 5 pounds”, then you may need to reevaluate. From a health standpoint, a difference of 5 pounds or so off of your target weight probably isn't going to make a whole lot of difference. What are your genetics like? Look at your siblings and blood relatives to see what sort of genes you may have. Consider what's the lowest weight you've been able to comfortably maintain, and also consider what's a realistic weight for you at this point. Even if you have managed to drop that last five pounds, but feel cranky and hungry when you get there, it may well be that your body feels better at a slightly higher weight than you would like.