

Journaling: Keeping a Diet Diary

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Q: I keep reading that the best way to lose weight is to keep a food journal and measure my food. How can anyone with a life do this? Can you give me some shortcuts and advice?

A: You've hit upon the secret behind why fad diets work at first, only to fail later. No matter what diet you choose, in the beginning when you are playing by the rules (and motivated to do so), you lead a low-calorie life and lose weight. At first you're psyched to follow the plan and rearrange your schedule accordingly. You may go out to dinner less often, you may encourage your family to follow the diet, too. In short, you spend mental and physical energy committing to (maybe even obsessing over) the plan. Most of the time this can lead to fast, dramatic weight loss.

But after a while, real life kicks in and you either get bored or you realize that you can't follow the diet to the tee. You slack off, and eventually jettison the restrictions altogether. Then you gain back some, all or sometimes more of the weight that you lost.

This pattern is so predictable that it's a wonder that people keep falling for the diet *du jour*. Instead, what they need to do is make gradual lifestyle changes to their everyday habits, which is where keeping a food journal can offer clear-eyed insight.

One reason we gain weight is we eat too much. Yes, I know, duh. But overeating is very easy to do in what Yale obesity researcher Dr. Kelly Brownell calls our "toxic environment." There is temptation at every corner, in every aisle of every store. (Why should a hardware store sell candy at the checkout counter?) Not only is food within reach wherever we go (and usually fattening fast food or junk food), our environment is engineered so we burn less calories by being less active. (Can you say remote control or car?)

The first step in making changes to your lifestyle is to understand your current eating and exercise patterns. Journaling, or keeping a food and exercise log, is a great way to do it. By writing down everything you eat, you may discover that you consistently skip breakfast (a big no-no when it comes to weight control). Some people log their emotional state when they eat. If you do this, you can identify if you overeat when you are stressed, for example. Recognizing these sorts of eating triggers and patterns can help you figure out better alternatives (say, going for a walk instead of opening a pint of Ben and Jerry's).

By weighing your pasta—and writing that meal down—you will be aware of what a normal serving size is. When you go to restaurant and are given a plate filled with enough pasta with cream sauce to feed an entire aerobics class, you will know that it is more than you need. If you eat it anyway, you'll know that you'll need to do more exercise than normal to burn those extra calories off. Or you may simply make a point of not cleaning your plate.

Although many people have maintained their weight loss in part by keeping an ongoing food diary (check out the National Weight Control Registry at <http://www.nwcr.ws/>), journaling's not necessarily for everybody. But give it a try! Even if you do it only for a week, you should find the process of chronicling what you eat and how you move very enlightening.