



Smash bad habits to get to your goal numbers.

Scale stuck?

Ten surprising reasons you're not losing weight, and how to move the needle again **By Liz Plosser**

Slimming down is somewhat like boating. You set your course toward a destination (your goal weight), propel yourself with the right fuel (diet and exercise) and end up on an island paradise (in a bikini!). But the tiniest leak in your ship could sink your efforts. We've uncovered 10 sneaky ways your workout, your work habits and even your clothing can undermine your diet, and we devised easy fixes for each. Spot what's holding you back, try our tips and set off toward your ideal body. Then slip into that swimsuit and enjoy!

DIET FLUB 1 You grocery shop on the fly

Like your boss and karaoke night, some things simply don't go well together. The supermarket and an empty stomach are similarly mismatched. Shopping when you're hungry makes you more likely to fill your basket with junk.

FIX IT Skip the checkout line and go online. Dieters who shopped at Web-based groceries bought fewer high-fat foods, a study from the University of Connecticut at Storrs finds. "It makes it easier to stick to your list," says Amelia Lake, Ph.D., a research fellow at the Human Nutrition Research Centre at Newcastle University in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England. (Go to Self.com/health for a balanced list.) If you shop in person, stick to the store's perimeter (typically the produce and dairy areas) to avoid impulse buys.

DIET FLUB 2 You work late

Overtime may help you nab a fatter paycheck, but it could foil your efforts to downsize your figure. Women who worked 40-plus hours per week were more likely to gain weight during the year than those who clocked out earlier, a study in the *International Journal of Obesity* reports. Stress and fatigue may make desk jockeys more apt to eat fast food and less inclined to exercise. "Women's bodies are wired to hang on to fat, especially in the abdomen, when they experience chronic stress," says Kathleen Hall, Ph.D., founder of The Stress Institute in Atlanta.

FIX IT Take mood-lifting breaks. "Pinpoint when during the day you're most likely to hit a slump," Hall says. "Then engage in something playful or soothing during that time—doing so produces feel-good endorphins to battle stress." Put on headphones and download a new song, or recap last night's reality-TV antics with a friend. Physically active downtime is especially effective, Hall says; stretch, toss a foam ball with an officemate or pump out a set of biceps curls using a dumbbell stashed under your desk.

DIET FLUB 3 You celebrate workouts with M&M's

After a tough hour at the gym, do you (A) grab fresh fruit, (B) feel too great

to eat or (C) reward yourself with a huge dinner ("I'll have the Fiesta Nachos, please!)? If you answered C, you're not alone. Women ate about 120 more calories following intense exercise than after a lighter workout that burned the same calories, a study from the University of Ottawa reveals. The splurge may feel justified because the workout seemed so difficult.

FIX IT Stow a healthy snack in your gym bag so you don't overdo your next meal. Mix $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of dried cranberries with 2 tablespoons of unshelled sunflower seeds in a resealable plastic bag. The mix packs protein and carbs to satisfy your hunger, and cranberries contain antioxidants that help quell postworkout inflammation, says Leslie Bonci, R.D., director of sports medicine nutrition at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

DIET FLUB 4 You don't ever count calories

You may think you're vigilant about monitoring portions, but mindless bites can equal hundreds of unaccounted-for calories.

FIX IT If dieting were a poker game, logging your food intake would be your ace in the hole. But few women have the discipline (or the time) to record every morsel. Fortunately, simply thinking about your most recent meal can keep overeating in check, a study from the University of Birmingham in England suggests. When women were asked to write down what they had for lunch

➤ before they were offered cookies later in the day, they ate fewer treats than those who weren't asked to remember their meal. "Recalling what you ate may remind you of how filling that food was," says lead researcher Suzanne Higgs, Ph.D.

DIET FLUB 5 You're an e-mail addict

The number of calories you burn e-mailing a coworker? Five. The number it takes to walk over to her? Eleven. Multiply that by how often this scenario plays out in a week (roughly a bazillion), and you see how tech squelches your activity level.

FIX IT Slip movement into your entire day, not only your gym time. Stand up when you're talking on the phone, and deliver at least five messages a day in person. You can torch about 100 calories daily this way, says James Levine, M.D., an endocrinologist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. That's enough to burn off nearly a pound a month!

DIET FLUB 6 Your workouts are routine

When your body grows accustomed to performing the same exercise over and over, it starts to get better at it. The result? Each move requires less effort, so you burn fewer calories.

FIX IT Step out of your comfort zone. For starters, ramp up your cardio with intervals (short bursts of high-speed effort—see the 2008 SELF Challenge, page 152, for ideas). Volunteers who interspersed hour-long bike rides with intervals (four minutes at high intensity followed by two minutes of rest) burned 36 percent more fat than when they cycled at a steady, moderate intensity, a study in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* indicates. Vary the type of exercise you do for even better results. If you lift weights, try kickboxing; if you're a cardio queen, pick up weights. Already burning and firming? Join a sports team. New activities sizzle more calories by activating different muscle groups.

DIET FLUB 7 You prefer comfy clothing

Forgiving styles, such as flowy tops and unstructured dresses, make it easy to miss cues that extra pounds are creeping on.

FIX IT Keep tabs on your tush by zipping up your favorite pair of denims every Friday. "I tell my clients all the time, 'Jeans don't lie,'" says Jim Karas, a trainer in Chicago and author of *The Cardio-Free Diet* (Simon Spotlight Entertainment). "Wear your jeans on the weekend; most people tend to eat more on those two days," Karas says. Once you've dropped a size, give away your larger clothes to ensure you won't drift into them again.

DIET FLUB 8 You taste while you cook

You can slice and dice with the best of them, so you can whip up a nutritious, light meal instead of dialing for oil-drenched takeout. But a spoonful here, a bite there and that glass of wine you sip while you're stirring can quickly add up until you've consumed a meal's worth of calories before dinner even hits the table.

FIX IT To keep your mouth busy, fix yourself a bowl of chopped veggies to munch on, or chew a piece of gum—it's no fun sneaking samples of stew with spearmint breath. You might also invite a pal into the kitchen with you. "My clients nibble more when they're preparing dinner alone because they're not occupied by talking to someone," says Monique Ryan, R.D., of Chicago. Cooking for one? Plug in your iPod and sing along.

DIET FLUB 9 Your kitchen is packed

If your fridge resembles a Trader Joe's display case, then you'll be constantly tempted to nosh. Dieters who were allowed to eat whatever they wanted for snacks took in more snack calories each week than those who were limited to one type, a study in the journal *Eating Behaviors* notes. Repeat eaters got tired of the flavor and craved it less. The same concept applies whether you're faced with unlimited options at a buffet, a restaurant or your own stuffed pantry. The more choices you have, the bigger your appetite will seem.

FIX IT Pick one splurge item to keep in the house at a time—chocolate, ice cream sandwiches or your favorite cheese—and have a little each day to satisfy your taste buds. Don't buy another treat until you've finished it. (But don't down it all at one sitting.) When you're eating out, skip buffets, forget the enormous menu and order from the specials board; you'll have fewer options, and the ingredients will probably be fresher anyway.

DIET FLUB 10 You slim down solo

It's tempting to keep your 10-pound goal a secret (and wow everybody later with your results), but coming clean about your diet to pals increases your odds of success, according to an analysis of 46 studies by researchers at Tufts-New England Medical Center in Boston. People with social support lost 6 percent more weight than those who dropped pounds on their own.

FIX IT Tell roommates, family and coworkers that you're eating healthfully. "They can provide encouragement, serve as role models or at least avoid acting as a bad influence," says lead author Michael Dansinger, M.D. "It also adds accountability." Pretty soon, the news will be everywhere: You've lost the weight for good. ■



Enjoy one (veggie) slice, not the whole pie.