

STEALTH DIET

Nearly 50 percent of women say they're trying to shed pounds—so why are they failing? Small mistakes and minor oversights weigh heavily on the scale. By Rory Evans

It's so nice to blame someone else. Finger-pointing and "not me"—ing happen everywhere from kindergarten sandboxes to the floor of the Senate. Closer to home, on the bathroom scale, you're apt to blame all kinds of uncontrollable x-factors for keeping you from dropping those last stubborn pounds. After all, it's hard not to shrug off the responsibility in an era when a consumer-affairs agency has to order a so-called dietetic ice-cream operation to stop falsely calling its products "low-calorie" (as happened with CremaLita in New York City) and when KFC, of all places, attempts to promote its breaded and deep-fat-fried chicken as low-carb. Last year, a man was sentenced to 15 months in prison for passing off full-fat chocolate-coated donuts (530 calories a pop) as carob-coated, low-fat, 135-calorie versions.

These diet dupes may be unconscionable, but they're most likely not responsible for your unbudging

bulge. Instead, the estimated 46 percent of all women who are trying to lose weight might be sabotaging their own best efforts with little errors that add up to frustration—covert liquid calories sipped all day, or the morning workout that justifies a lunchtime feeding frenzy. To illustrate just how small the margin of error needs to be, "there's an estimate that the current obesity epidemic could be due to just 11 extra calories a day per person over the 20 years we've seen the problem," says Susie Swithers of the department of psychological sciences at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

The good news is that once you identify the unwitting sabotages, there are ways to reclaim control. "Incorporating [certain tricks] will ensure you're making good choices most of the time," says Molly Gee, a dietitian at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. And soon enough, instead of finger-pointing, you'll have the scale needle pointing in precisely the right direction.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEVEN MEISEL

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#1 DRINKING HEAVILY

Your morning *molto grande*, Vesuvius-sized vanilla chai latte. Your two adorable glass bottles of Coca Cola at that authentic French bistro for lunch. The veritable vat of fruit smoothie you nurse all afternoon at your desk. Then, two Amstels at dinner. You might rehydrate as if you were crossing the Sahara on foot, instead of simply getting through a day. And you likely don't even think about these calories in your mental tally: "People think that if they're not chewing, they're not eating," says Lisa Young, the New York University nutritionist featured in the documentary *Supersize Me* and author of *The Portion Teller* (Doubleday). Indeed, a 2005 study at Pennsylvania State University tracked the daily caloric intake of women who had certain drinks with their lunch—water, diet soda, regular soda, orange juice, or skim milk. Those who had a caloric beverage consumed an extra 104 calories on average without feeling any more full. Thus, switching to a no-calorie or lower-calorie drink, like unsweetened tea or club soda with a splash of juice, "is a really good strategy and one of the easiest changes you can make," says Pennsylvania State University's Barbara Rolls, a lead researcher on the study and author of *The Volumetrics Eating Plan* (Harper-Collins). By cutting out a daily can of soda, you save 150 calories per day, Rolls points out—and "that amounts to 15 pounds of weight loss per year." For those moments when life will simply not be the same without the taste of real Dr Pepper, as you stop in a fast-food place where they give you the cup that you fill yourself, put the liquid in first and then the ice, so you can get a true sense of how much you'll be drinking.

Another recent study found that drinking alcohol also leads to eating more, but even the drink itself has caloric heft:

At nearly 200 calories, that frozen margarita you order after work is almost the equivalent of eating a slice of pizza, says Elizabeth Somer, author of *The 10 Habits That Mess Up a Woman's Diet* (McGraw-Hill) and a dietitian in Salem, Oregon. A glass of antioxidant-rich red wine has about 100 calories, and at just about 70 calories, a white-wine spritzer is an even lighter option...albeit much, much girlier.

#2 NO-CAL, NO-FAT, NO RESULTS

The past decade has been a time line of diet fads: There was that year we gave up fat and chowed a grocery aisle's worth of Snackwells. There was the winter we slurped enough cabbage soup for a Stalin-era Gulag. Then we started bed-hopping from Barry Sears to Robert Atkins to Arthur Agatston (why are their names more memorable than those of the other men in our lives?).

Even women who aren't on a name-brand diet may frequently end up consuming so-called diet food, such as those with artificial sweeteners. Unfortunately, that could backfire, according to research done at Purdue University. The study involved two groups of rats—one that drank naturally sweet liquid and another that drank artificially sweetened liquid. After ten days, the rats were offered naturally sweet chocolate, and the rats that were used to no-calorie, artificially sweetened drinks ate more. The findings suggest that as ingestion of artificially sweetened foods and drinks increases—for rats as well as humans—the body becomes ill-equipped to recognize calories from naturally sweet foods and overcompensates by overeating. "As the saying goes, it's not nice to fool Mother Nature," says Susie Swithers, a researcher on the study. "If something is really sweet and doesn't have calories, it may derail your body." So while the most comfortable first step in curtailing liquid calories may be to switch to diet soda or some other

diet drink (Gee likes the small packets of Crystal Light designed to be mixed into 20-ounce water bottles), what's even better is to switch to a natural alternative, like sparkling water with lemon. "Yeah, what I keep telling people is, 'A glass of water is really good,'" jokes Swithers, well aware of the buzz-kill. The researchers at Purdue have moved on to experimenting with low-calorie versions of high-fat, high-calorie potato chips, and the outcome seems to be similar to that of the artificial-sweetener study: Rats provided with both the high-calorie and diet chips ate more food in a day than rats offered just the high-calorie chips.

"Unfortunately, the message is a hard one," Swithers says. "There is no free lunch." Nor is there a calorie-free lunch, apparently. So, after all the fad diets, it may be that ye olde calorie-counting is still the best way to manage your weight—with a caveat: Instead of filling up on sugar-free, fat-free, zero-net-carb, light Frankenfood, enjoy and savor smaller servings of the actual food, whatever it may be.

#3 A FAT ATTITUDE

For all her "we're doomed" mentality, at least Chicken Little had the word "little" right there in her name. Whereas you feel frustrated and destined to keep carrying around those ten extra pounds without the benefit of "skinny" or "svelte" as a moniker. A pessimistic attitude, whether about the sky falling or pounds dropping, can be self-destructive. Overweight people who believe obesity has a physical origin and cannot be changed by behavior are less likely to lose weight than those who think self-control factors strongly in trimming down, a Dutch study in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found. Another recent University of Minnesota study of 302 overweight women, ranging from

146 to 279 pounds, asked them to identify their “goal weight loss” (49 pounds, on average) and their “dream weight loss” (60 pounds, on average) for an 18-month effort. The women with the higher “dream” numbers—even though they were often unrealistic—achieved greater weight loss than women who dreamed smaller. “They were more behaviorally motivated than women with lower goals,” says Jennifer Linde, the study’s lead author. “They reported a plan to use more weight-loss strategies in their program, which suggests they understand that it takes more effort to lose more weight.” Specifically, they ate less fat and boosted their vegetable intake.

Of course, there’s more to it than big, round, ideal numbers. The very real number on the scale dial can also affect your thinking about your daily diet—especially when you climb aboard every morning, as did a group of freshmen at Cornell. Although frequent weigh-ins have a tendency to frustrate those who are trying to lose weight, they actually seem to help people maintain it: “We were able to block weight gain entirely in that group,” says David A. Levitsky, a professor of nutrition and psychology at the university. Participants who didn’t weigh in daily gained an average of four to six pounds. Dodging the dreaded freshman fat did, however, come with the minor indignity of plotting daily weight on an Excel spreadsheet: “When you’re literally watching your weight,” Levitsky says of the system, “you get a good indication of the difference between what you eat and what you expend, and if you gain a little weight over a few days, you’re able to turn it around.”

#4 PORTION INFLATION

It’s as if the world has turned into Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory, operating on the principle: See a tantalizing array

of food, then devour it. (And everyone plumps up just like Violet Beauregarde.) Studies have repeatedly shown that the more food that’s placed in front of people, the more they eat. The largest portions—muffins the size of ottomans, steaks the size of hibachis—usually come at restaurants. “Any place you’re served food, as opposed to making your plate yourself, it’s easy to overeat,” Levitsky says. The same goes for any time you eat

“People think that if they’re not chewing, they’re not eating.”

directly from a bag or bucket: Thus the disappearance of a large bag of Twizzlers even before the movie starts (no, make that even before the *previews* start). The same goes for when you’re preoccupied or engaged in a lively conversation: Thus the twice-refilled breadbasket at a restaurant as you and your best friend volley “my boyfriend, the tool” stories.

Even when restaurant dinners dominate your social life, there are ways to remain in control (beyond avoiding establishments whose plates are, in fact, platters). If keeping portions in check is challenging because you regularly don’t eat until 8 p.m., Young suggests snacking at 5—on a cup of vegetable soup, or baby carrots with hummus. “Otherwise you’re going to eat the entire breadbasket.” When the basket does descend on the table like the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, there’s no call for attacking it the way Kubrick’s violent apes did. To start, says Gee, the dietitian at Baylor, “when they bring that basket of rolls or chips at the Mexican restaurant, get a saucer, and take what you’ll eat. Don’t eat from the basket.” For entrées, Young recommends the old standbys for eyeballing a healthy portion: a deck of cards for protein, a computer mouse for a potato, a large handful for pasta (and half a golf ball for Parmesan), a checkbook for fish, and a free pass for fruit and vegetables. When you eat slowly and savor every bite, Gee says, you’re more likely to realize when you’ve had enough.

And once you’ve decided you’ve met your limit, safeguard against picking at the remainder—one-sixteenth of a morsel at a time—by flagging down the waiter as if your plate were on fire and asking him to clear it. Surrender your utensils, too, to inhibit poaching from friends’ plates.

Snacking also calls for vigilance. Again, “don’t eat directly out of the bag or box unless it’s baby carrots or blueberries,” Young says. However,

some of the latest snacks are packaged by calorie count, in which case it’s perfectly safe to eat the whole bag. Indeed, as people have begun paying more attention to portions, the snack-food industry—they of the Bigger Grabs and “Go Snacks” designed to fit in car cup holders—have responded. As of May, low-fat Pringles come in a 100-calorie stack, and Nabisco offers packages of Ritz, Oreos, Chips Ahoy!, and Wheat Thins that contain 100 calories and no more than three grams of fat.

#5 PASSING ON PROTEIN

Low-fat this, reduced-carb that. As it turns out, a low-carb diet might be a misnomer: A high-protein regimen, in particular, seems to encourage weight loss best, at least in the short term, according to a review of studies recently published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. Don’t let visions of a bunless cheeseburger or New York strips with a melting pat of Hotel Bar butter dance in your head:

Protein comes in all different foods that are ounce-for-ounce lower in calories and fat than beef. “Dairy is protein, and people forget that,” Young point out. “Get protein at breakfast and lunch as well as at dinner—yogurt with fruit, bean soups, peanut butter on your bread. Add half a cup of chickpeas to your salad, and you’ll have an ample [and low-fat] seven grams of protein for a mere 135 calories.”

Part of the reason protein helps dieters, the researchers hypothesize, is that it makes people feel fuller longer. Sure enough, another recent study determined that an egg breakfast makes people feel 50 percent fuller than bread or cereal and causes them to limit their calories throughout the day. “It wasn’t just three hours, but 24 hours. With the egg breakfast, they genuinely ate less all day,” says Nikhil Dhurandhar, a lead researcher on the study and a professor at Pennington Biomedical Research Center at Louisiana State University

was fat. To that end, be sure to keep protein-laden snacks on hand—Somer suggests eating a few nuts *before* you’re hungry, because, she says, “When you are ravenous, you will eat anything.”

#6 INSUFFICIENT FIBER

It’s not the sexiest dietary component. Maybe fiber has spent too much time hanging out with Metamucil-toting senior citizens. Or maybe it’s just that traditionally, it has been associated with grainy, gray provisions that appear to be

“The worst thing you can do is work through your lunch.”

in Baton Rouge. (The reason for the effect is unknown, Dhurandhar says; though eggs are high in protein, they also contain other substances, including fat and vitamins, that may play a role.) At lunch, the egg eaters consumed 568 calories compared to the bagel noshers’ 732. On average, the total daily caloric intake was 1,761 for the egg eaters, compared with 2,035 for the others.

Evidently, a high-protein diet also helps people perform the seemingly impossible feat of keeping weight off. In February, the *British Journal of Nutrition* published a study involving people who lost 7.5 percent of their body weight on a very low-calorie monthlong diet. For the following six months, the researchers divided the participants into two groups: one that ate an extra 30 grams of protein in addition to their regular diet and a control group. Those in the protein group gained back less weight, and none of the weight regained

made from papier-mâché. In fact, fiber is “very, very important,” Young stresses. “It makes you feel full, and you end up eating less.” Last spring, the journal *Nutrition* published a study that reviewed many years of fiber research and found that high-fiber diets are linked to lower body weight and lower body fat.

However, “most Americans get half the recommended fiber,” says Joanne Slavin, a professor of nutrition at the University of Minnesota and an author of the study. And those on a no-bread, no-bagels (no-fun) low-carbohydrate diet are especially prone to fiber deficiency, Slavin adds, since “for the average person, bread is a significant source of fiber, so when bread isn’t eaten, fiber intake goes down.” Slavin recommends aiming for 14 grams of fiber for every 1,000 calories. But that’s not a consignment to bran muffins and oatmeal: “Fiber is found in most plant-based foods—vegetables, fruit, legumes, and of course whole grains,”

Gee says. Even the “but I prefer white bread” excuse doesn’t work anymore, she points out, thanks to white-tasting, white-looking loaves such as Nature’s Own Whitebread and IronKids.

As with protein, Slavin recommends trying to get at least a little bit of fiber whenever you eat: “whole-grain toast for breakfast, legumes in soups or salads, fruit or vegetables at meals or snacks,” she says. Unfortunately, there isn’t a rule of thumb for knowing which fruits and vegetables are highest in fiber, although whole citrus fruit is always preferable to juice, unpeeled apples and pears have more fiber than peeled, and firm vegetables such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, and sweet potatoes (again, skin on) are all good sources. “Fiber fills you up, not fills you out,” says Somer, who has a client who has lost nearly 30 pounds simply by dutifully eating two servings of fruit or vegetables at every meal. Of the difficulty in eyeballing fiber from food to food, Somer advises, “Just eat at least eight servings of a variety of fruits and vegetables, and you’ll be fine. Not including French fries or iceberg lettuce.” The latter, burger deluxes and Maytag blue salads be damned, contains less than one gram of fiber per cup.

#7 SLEEPY MEALS

It comes like the world’s greatest affront: the chirp of your alarm clock after a night of too little sleep. Having a job and other annoying grown-up responsibilities, you must override your instinct to burrow back under the comforter. Instead, you just gravitate toward food that’s almost as comforting—a sausage-and-cheese biscuit or a swirling cinnamon bun sized to resemble a Cat 4 hurricane.

It’s not just you. Studies suggest that this kind of exhaustion-related eating has a scientific explanation. Last year,

researchers at the University of Chicago discovered that men who slept four hours a night for nearly a week had 20 percent lower prebreakfast levels of leptin—the hormone that makes you feel full—than when they had slept a solid nine hours a night. In a related study, sleep-deprived men exhibited increased appetite, especially for high-calorie carbohydrate foods. Then, in a study published last April, researchers at Yale University made a connection between insomnia and obesity: In response to stress, they found, certain neurons in the hypothalamus, which regulates both appetite and wakefulness, not only are unable to filter signals (leading to insomnia) but also reorganize and get overstimulated (leading to overeating).

“Often, when people are exhausted, they tend to overeat as a way to stay awake,” Young points out. “The best thing to do is eat foods containing protein and fiber, as they help prevent fluctuations in blood sugar.” She recommends yogurt with fruit, for example, or eggs or egg whites with low-fat cheese and whole-wheat toast, or a bowl of high-fiber cereal. If part of what makes you feel better when you’re tired is the ritual of stopping on your way to the office to pick up something (greasy, salty, or sweet) to eat, get just the eggs, or order fiber-rich, comfort-food oatmeal with cinnamon instead of cinnamon sugar. And if your day simply will not be bearable without bacon, you don’t need to order the entire sandwich; just get a side order of two slices, since as Young allows, “a little bit of an improvement over what you usually do is still progress.”

#8 FRUITLESS DIETS

It’s difficult to believe that you don’t get enough fruit, what with that bag of Skittles as your afternoon pick-me-up,

or the diet cherry Coke you’ve taken to sipping. Of course you know that fruit flavor and actual fruit are two very different things, and according to a 2004 study from Laval University in Quebec, eating the real deal helps people maintain their weight. Over a six-year period, participants who reported increasing their fruit intake gained less weight and body fat, regardless of how much they exercised. Juice did not count as a serving of fruit (and Skittles did not even merit mention). Again, fruit has fiber that gives a sense of fullness.

Part of what keeps people from getting their recommended five servings of fruit (or vegetables) a day is their limited idea of what they like. It’s just the usual suspects—apples, oranges, and bananas—that they either get sick of or don’t like for whatever reason (the acidity, the waxy apple peel, the sour pith in an orange, the mushiness of a banana). Considering the vast array in the produce section, however, “you just might find a new favorite,” Gee says. “You need to be adventurous.”

Another deterrent is that fruit bought with the best intentions will turn on you in more ways than one. One day it’s the lush exemplar of nature’s perfectly packaged goodness... and the next a bruised orb of unidentifiable mush. *Et tu*, Braeburn apple? Gee points out that “part of the trick is making it readily available” and suggests paying extra for the convenience of precut, prepeeled, prewashed berries and melon. She also recommends buying just a few pieces at a time while they’re ripe, so there’s always a piece ready to eat. And keep it where you’ll see it—in a bowl on the counter or on an eye-level shelf in the refrigerator. Yes, the lower drawers might keep them colder, but they’re also out of sight and out of mind...and within a week, beyond recognition. (According to a survey conducted for Whirlpool and Glad, 61 percent of Americans throw out at least one rotten piece of produce each week.)

You can also consider freezing your own fruit or buying bags of unsweetened, syrup-free flash-frozen berries. “Nibble an entire bag of frozen blueberries, and you will never pack on

a single pound,” Somer says. In fact, a bowl of antioxidant-rich Wyman’s Fresh Frozen Wild Blueberries stands in nicely for Ben & Jerry’s. All the ritual—eaten with a spoon in front of HBO—with none of the fat and 80 calories per cup, as opposed to 660 for the same amount of Chubby Hubby.

#9 FITNESS FATNESS

This morning, you gave the elliptical trainer 30 minutes (a full 13 of which you weren’t even on your cell phone) and you’ve spent the rest of the day congratulating yourself with snacks and larger meals. But according to a study conducted at the University of Ottawa in Ontario, less-vigorous exercise might be better for your diet. In the study, two groups of women exercised on the treadmill to burn 350 calories. One group did a short, high-intensity workout; the other did a longer, low-intensity one. At lunch and dinner that day, women who had done the high-intensity activity ate 51 percent more calories than the women who exercised at a more leisurely pace—and took in 91 percent of the calories their workout had burned. The authors of the study suggest that the intense workout depleted the body of glucose, which then triggered more eating.

“Exercise is not a license to eat more,” Gee says. “For mere mortals like ourselves, most people, aside from professional athletes, are not going to compensate for overeating with physical activity, regardless of intensity and endurance.” Perhaps more to the point, exercise should not be thought of as a calorie eraser: “People tend to think that because they broke a sweat for 45 minutes, they burned thousands of calories,” says Steve Modzelewski, a personal-training manager with *(continued on page 247)*

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Crunch Fitness in New York City. "In

weight only by sitting at work. These conditions are most likely mediating factors," says Tea Lallukka, one of the study's authors and a researcher in the department of public health at the

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THE BEAUTY EXPERT

combining cardio workouts and strength training (ideally with a trainer) and switching around the program every four to six weeks, because "you'd be surprised at how quickly the body adapts" and stops changing.

#10 EATING ON THE JOB

A Wolf cooking range weighs nearly half a ton. Coincidentally, so does your desk—especially after all the code-red paperwork and bulging file folders are factored in. While you never find yourself in front of a Wolf, you do find yourself wolfing down food at your desk, day in and day out. The more time you spend at work, the less control you have over what you eat and how you exercise. (Has any woman in the history of Chinese-food delivery arrived home from work at 9:37 P.M. and placed an order for steamed spinach?)

People who are stressed out or overworked are more likely to gain weight, according to a study conducted in Helsinki, Finland, and published in *The International Journal of Obesity*. The study also found that women who were dissatisfied with their work/home balance were susceptible to putting on pounds. "Obviously, one won't gain

plowing through paperwork—won't even register. "The worst I can do is work through your lunch," she says. "In the course of a day when you're going to be at work 12 hours, is it really worth it to take 15 minutes to eat and reenergize?" She also recommends taking two-minute breaks every couple of hours to stretch or walk, and bringing snacks to avoid the vending machine.

"You wouldn't walk out of your house without clean underwear or brush your teeth, so don't go to work without snacks," says Somer, who recommends string cheese, whole-grain crackers, yogurt, and cut-up fruit.

To sneak in a little exercise, Young encourages fidgeting—most likely because she doesn't have to share an office with you. Mayo Clinic research has, however, found fidgeting to be a habit of thin people. (And honestly, on the continuum of ways to annoy your colleagues, bouncing your foot under your desk doesn't even come close to telling the same story 11 times in one day on successive personal phone calls, or whistling "Philadelphia Freedom.") If you take the subway to work, get out one stop early and walk, Young says, or better yet, "subway surf" by standing and engaging your core muscles to balance, as opposed to straphanging, to get a little Bosu-style exercise. Leave the office at lunchtime, and walk for half an hour or 45 minutes (bring your cell phone or Blackberry in case the boss is looking for you).

And vow that one day when you're the boss, you'll replace the office vending machine and burnt-coffee maker with a Pilates Reformer. ♦

10 HIDDEN DIET MISTAKES And How to Fix Them—Fast

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