Healthy dieting: how to realistically achieve your goals

Frustrated about your weight? Confused by the twists and turns of following fad diets? The reality is, there are literally hundreds of "too-good-to-be-true" diets that boast a quick fix for weight loss. Unfortunately, most of them omit certain food groups or require extreme restrictions on your food intake.

To achieve and maintain a healthy weight, you have to follow an eating plan you can live with—for a lifetime. That means no severe restrictions, no extreme hunger and no fads. Here are a few tips that could help you avoid the dieting merry-go-round for good.

Change your perspective. Realize that weight management isn't a short-term goal but a "life-term" goal. By doing this, you can better commit to the ideas of balance and change in how and what you eat. Begin by slowly adopting new eating habits as part of a routine that you can live with. For example, bring a healthy lunch to work three days per week, or indulge yourself with low-fat desserts or drink water instead of soft drinks when you're thirsty.

Be realistic. The average adult gains one to three pounds per year. One pound of fat equals 3,500 calories. So what makes you think you can take it all off in just a few weeks? Slow and steady is best unless your doctor feels your health condition could benefit from more rapid weight loss. Expect to lose about a pound or two a week. Weight loss at this rate is composed mostly of fat (not fluid) and has a much better chance of staying off.

Spot the fad diets. Fad diets come and go—and so does your weight. Before starting on any diet program, make sure that:

- The diet is based on more than a single study
- Dramatic statements about results are not refuted by reputable health organizations
- The program is not associated with a product sell
- The plan does not ignore the uniqueness of individuals
- All major food groups are built into the plan's daily food consumption

Make every meal count. Bypassing meals—especially breakfast—to save calories is a bad idea since you're likely to over-compensate (binge) at other times during the day. Besides, you can actually lose weight by eating breakfast. Studies show that people who eat breakfast tend to carry less weight than those who do not. A healthy breakfast keeps blood sugar and hormone levels stable while the metabolism buzzes along at a higher level, burning more calories. If you don't particularly enjoy breakfast, consider eating some of your favourite healthy lunch or dinner options as an alternative in the morning.

Resist emotional eating. Emotional eating means consuming large quantities of comfort or junk food to try to heal an emotional situation. Not only does this lead to weight management problems, it can also prevent us from dealing with, or resolving, the situation that is driving us to eat. You can help by recognizing that this type of eating is in response to feelings instead of hunger, and by identifying your eating triggers. Keep a diary of what and when you eat, and identify your thoughts and feelings. You may begin to see a pattern of emotional eating. Then talk to a doctor, registered dietician and/or counsellor to help you learn how to substitute food with more appropriate management techniques.

Be a strategy-safe dieter. In your dieting plan, include flexible food choices, weight goals set by a health professional, the recommended daily allowances for vitamins and minerals, and a long-term approach to weight maintenance. Plans should also improve overall eating habits, increase physical activity, and modify lifestyle habits that may contribute to weight gain. Consult with your doctor if you plan to lose more than 15 to 20 pounds, have any health problems or take any medication on a regular basis.

Get moving. Daily exercise burns calories and suppresses appetite. It also improves your sense of well-being and decreases stress, which often leads to overeating. Determine what type of physical activity best suits your

lifestyle by considering if you enjoy the outdoors or prefer indoor activities. Also take into account social aspects such as your preference for time alone to think and reflect, or participating in activities with others.

If you're not used to physical activity, start at an easy pace and work your way up to more intense exercise. Start with a brisk walk, a short jog or moderate swimming. It's recommended to gradually work toward 30 to 60 minutes of daily activity. Also try to incorporate some simple calorie-burners into your everyday routine.

Choose a plan for you. A weight-loss plan has to be practical. Picture yourself sticking to the plan for the rest of your life. If you can't see yourself on a certain plan longer than a few days or weeks, then chances are it's not for you. Everyone is different and you need to listen to your own unique needs. Learn which plans work for you, which ones make you feel energetic, which ones make you feel tired, which ones put you on a merry-go-round of cravings and which ones don't.

Finding the right way to lose and maintain weight shouldn't be a quest of trial and error, tribulations and defeat, but a journey of self-discovery. It's a personal way of life. Be sure to consult with your doctor for more information on healthy dieting and/or weight loss. He or she may want to monitor your progress.