



Are You Ready to Start a Weight-Loss Program?

By Marnell Jameson

As we peel off our sweaters with the onset of summer, many of us find another layer beneath that we'd just as soon not have. If you're like many people, you've put on a few pounds over the cool months and now want to improve your form for the skin-baring summer months.

Here's what some leading nutrition, fitness and motivation experts suggest when it comes to losing weight, getting fit and putting new zest in the day.

Know Your Start Point

Put on a bathing suit and have someone take your picture, says Kelli Calabrese, fitness consultant for eDiets, an Internet-based weight-control program. Next record measurements of your chest, waist, hips, upper arms, thighs and calves. Record your weight, and, if possible, try to get your fat composition taken at a local health club.

Put on some music with a good beat, and take a step test. Step up and down on one step until the song is over (or for three minutes); then stop and count your heart rate for 60 seconds. Three months later, repeat everything. Take another photo wearing the same suit, stand in the same place and in the same kind of light. Do the same test, with the same song and same stair-step, and see how much more fit you've become. To measure your progress, keep a fitness journal.

Get a Sponsor

Whatever your goal -- exercise, diet or the resolve not to go back to an unhealthy relationship -- find a sponsor. Call this friend, colleague or relative every morning to tell them what you plan to do to stay on your plan and how you did the day before. Studies show that when people have to be accountable to someone other than themselves, success rates soar. While you're at it, tell a lot of people what you plan to do and how you plan to do it, says Mary McCabe, a certified personal trainer and nutrition specialist based in Sea Cliff, N.Y. "If you do, you're a lot more likely to stick to your plan."

Find a 'Life Preserver'

Create a clear mental image -- or two or three -- that you can grab hold of when you're about to fall off your program, whether it's a diet, exercise, smoking or addiction program, recommends Charles Platkin, author of "Breaking the Pattern" and founder of Nutricise.com, a New York-based weight-loss organization. One woman, for example, pictured herself 20 pounds thinner running into her ex-husband. Another imagined wearing a sleeveless dress to her sister's wedding. Another pictured getting a better checkup at her next doctor's visit: lower blood pressure and cholesterol,

and good sugar counts. Whenever temptation strikes, pull up one of those "future moments."

Get Your Head in Gear

Spend five minutes a day visualizing your health and fitness goals, says Calabrese. Focus on how you want your body to feel (strong) and perform (successfully). Great athletes like Tiger Woods do this regularly. Also think about the benefits you'll derive immediately after working out: a greater sense of well-being, improved mood, sharper mind, better sleep that night. That will get you going. While you work out, replace negative self-talk with positive. Instead of saying, "I'm so tired," say, "My legs are unstoppable."

Run for the Attitude

Vigorous aerobic exercise is probably the single best way to shake off the doldrums because it's a mood lifter. In a study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, researchers looked at the effect of exercise on phenyl ethylamine, a natural chemical in the body linked to energy, mood and attention. The study tested the levels of this chemical in participants on days they did no exercise and on days they ran on a treadmill for 30 minutes. They found that on exercise days, phenyl ethylamine concentrations increased an average of 77 percent.

Hire a Pro

Many people say a trainer isn't in their budget yet think nothing of splurging on a restaurant meal. You don't have to see a trainer three times a week, but maybe just once a week for three weeks to get you on a program, then once a month for six months to keep you on track. This can be an excellent investment in your health, and help keep you accountable.

Drink Your Milk

Losing weight may be as easy as drinking your milk, says Dr. Michael Zemel, a professor of nutrition and director of the Nutrition Institute at the University of Tennessee, in Knoxville, Tenn. Dr. Zemel and his colleagues have been looking at the effects of a high-calcium diet on weight loss for the past four years. They have found that consuming more dairy calcium actually aids weight loss. "When people consume a low-calcium diet, they activate metabolic machinery that tells fat cells to make more fat and burn less. Eating a high-calcium diet reverses this," he says, "and prompts the cells to burn fat."

If you're exercising and dieting to lose weight, you could lose weight (and, specifically, more fat) more quickly if you add three to four servings of low-fat dairy products -- not calcium pills -- to your diet each day. "Where the calcium comes from matters," says Dr. Zemel. "Dairy calcium -- specifically that found in milk, hard cheese and yogurt -- is markedly more effective than pills."

Color Your Palate

Another great way to shed excess pounds is to eat seven servings of fruits and especially vegetables a day, the more colorful the better, says David Heber, M.D., author of "What

Color Is Your Diet?" and a professor of medicine and public health at the University of California at Los Angeles and director of the UCLA Center for Human Nutrition. "You will fill up faster because these are high-fiber foods," says Dr. Heber, "yet you'll feel lighter and very likely lose weight."

At breakfast, have vegetable juice like V-8, instead of fruit juice; it's half the calories and rich in lycopene, a cancer-fighting chemical. At dinner, fill 2/3 of your plate with colored vegetables, then add a portion of protein. Skip the rice, potatoes, beans and pasta. Find a tasty vinegar, like a raspberry, rice or Balsamic, and use that for salad dressing. For dessert, have mixed fruit, and for those who want a chocolate fix, drizzle a little fat-free chocolate syrup on top. It's low in calories, but still tastes decadent.

Watch Those 'Healthy' Portions

Studies show that most women greatly under-report both what they eat and how much, says Debra Wein, dietitian and president of The Sensible Nutrition Connection in Boston, Mass. Many also think a restaurant portion is really "a serving" when it's often the size of three. Getting a small kitchen scale to use while cooking will help you visualize how much 4 ounces of meat really is. (It's about the size of the palm of your hand.) If the steak you're eating is three times that size, then count it as three servings. Use measuring cups when serving portions of cereal, vegetables or rice.

That Means Snacks, Too

"Ninety-eight percent of weight loss is about portion control," agrees Dr. Kristine Clark, director of sports nutrition at Pennsylvania State University, who tells clients to take an especially close look at their snacking. "I've seen people underestimate their snacking in food logs by as much as 1,000 calories a day."

Start the Day With Protein

Having a protein-rich breakfast, instead of one high in starch, will keep you satisfied longer. A recent study compared participants who ate an egg-white omelet with vegetables for breakfast to a group that ate cereal. Though the calories consumed were equal, the group that ate the cereal reported feeling hungry sooner.

Have protein with each meal because it digests more slowly, helps even out your metabolism and keeps hunger pangs away longer, says Dr. Clark. Protein is the alertness nutrient. It stimulates the body's natural epinephrine and dopamine, so it's "think food." Conversely, foods high in simple carbohydrates stimulate serotonin, a calming substance in the brain. "That's why women often reach for high-carbohydrate foods when they're stressed, but it's easy to go overboard because the feeling doesn't last."

When you hit that afternoon slump, protein-rich foods are once again the snack of choice. Try sliced turkey breast on a whole-grain cracker, or tuna and carrots.

Shuffle the Deck

Muscles are like people; they get complacent when they do the same thing all the time. Fool them by mixing up your workout. Make a basket of five to seven index cards, says

McCabe. On each card, write a different workout. For instance, they could say "30-minute walk/jog," "Ride exercise bike (or treadmill) for 30 minutes," "Take a step or yoga class." When it's time to exercise, pick a card. When you've worked through all the routines, start over. "No two weeks will feel the same, and you'll keep your muscles guessing."

If you prefer to stick to walking, you can still incorporate a lot of variety. Do hills one day. The next take a flat walk, and mix in intervals of speed walking or short jogs. Build in a circuit as you walk: Ten minutes of walking, then 50 jumping jacks; 10 more minutes of walking and 50 push-ups against a tree, etc.

Don't Mistake Activity for Exercise

"Washing the car and gardening are great activities, but don't count them as exercise," cautions Dr. Edward Jackowski, author of "Escape Your Shape." People think all they have to do is move for 20 to 30 minutes a day. That's not true. You have to workout a minimum of three days a week. If your workout suddenly feels easy, it's not doing the job.

Go Tribal

Choose places -- such as the park or gym -- and times -- like lunch hour -- to exercise when others are also actively exercising, too. You'll catch their energy and feel more motivated, says Dr. James Gavin, Ph.D., a sports psychologist and professor at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec.

Strength Train for Fitness Gain

Adding muscle boosts your metabolism and helps burn more calories -- even as you sleep. One pound of muscle burns 40-50 calories a day just to maintain itself. Plus, muscles, when toned, pull the skin tighter, giving the body a more youthful appearance. Being stronger also makes every day tasks, such as opening doors, carrying groceries and lifting children, easier and reduces your risk of injury.

Start each day with push-ups, says Dr. Clark. Do a brisk set or two of 12 push-ups, or as many as you can do. If you can't do knee-style push-ups, try doing wall push-ups, then graduate to a chair, then to the floor. Next, fill two empty gallon milk jugs with as much water as you can comfortably lift several times, and do bicep curls.

Have a Back-Up Plan

When the day comes -- and it will -- that you can't stick to your exercise plan, rather than give yourself a pass, create an immediate back-up plan. If you normally workout Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but a meeting pre-empted Friday's workout, make yourself a non-negotiable deal to exercise Saturday.

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