

Weight loss isn't so hard if you start with simple changes

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This will be the year you get serious, right?

You're ready for a major dietary overhaul. Sugar, fat and carbs are out; fresh produce, whole grains and lean protein — not to mention plenty of exercise — are in. Everything you've been meaning to do all year.

Too bad you and millions of other Americans are doomed to fail. Blame the lure of instant gratification. The desire for immediate results reliably obscures some of the most sound and oft-repeated dietary advice — major makeovers rarely stick. So maybe this year try a more novel — and more likely to succeed — approach: small changes that are easy to live with but that cumulatively can have significant and lasting effects on your **health**. Never mind your pants size. "People hate to admit the fact that it took them 10 years, 20 years, 30 years to get from a size they are comfortable with to a size they are miserable with," says Jeanne Goldberg, a professor of nutrition science at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy. "They want to turn that around in 10 minutes," she says. "That's totally unachievable." Where to begin?

It helps to equate food with physical activity. A new book by nutrition expert Charles Stuart Platkin, "The Diet Detective's Count Down," lists thousands of foods and how long it takes to burn them off by walking, running, biking, swimming, dancing and doing yoga. (Platkin's Diet Detective regular column is on C4 today). That glazed Krispy Kreme is less tempting when you know you have to add almost an hour of walking to your day to counteract it.

Knowing what to change in your diet also is easier when you know what your habits are. Most people wildly underestimate how much food they eat. That's why Platkin urges people to keep a food diary for several days before attempting any changes.

A food journal helps track all those spare nibbles and extra sodas people tend to gloss over when tallying how much they eat. With a few days tracked, it's easier to find less painful ways to trim. Start by looking at beverages, especially soda and juice, which account for many of Americans' excess calories. Swapping out even just one high-calorie drink a day can have a remarkable effect. Consider diet drinks or water as substitutes.

"Over a year, that 100 calories a day is a 10-pound weight loss," says Leah McLaughlin, an editor at Prevention magazine.

Smoothies, which often masquerade as **health** food, are another dangerous drink. The sugar in all that fruit adds up quickly. Goldberg suggests diluting them with water, using skim milk instead of whole and adding fat-free dried milk for creaminess with fewer calories.

And don't forget the cream in your coffee, especially the fancy coffees (some of which pack hundreds of calories). Try halving the sugar or switching to skim milk. Once you get used to that, try doing both. Snacks are another area where people don't realize how much they eat, often involving foods with lots of calories and little nutrition.

Rather than trying to skip snacks, think of them as small meals, says McLaughlin. That will make you less likely to grab a candy bar and more likely to eat something not only healthier but more filling. And that means you're less likely to snack again later. And as with smoothies, fruit as a snack can be problematic. A large apple isn't one serving; it's two or three. Pick smaller pieces.

That goes for other snacks, too. Though prepackaged single servings of snacks such as popcorn and cookies cost more, the dietary benefit is worth the price, says Goldberg.

Meals are challenging. Begin by battling the portion distortion that results in hundreds of excess calories. Eating off smaller plates (try salad plates, which are the size of dinner plates from 20 or 30 years ago) helps limit how much food can be piled on.

Planning is key. A few minutes spent determining the week's meals means you never have to come home and wonder what's for dinner. And that makes it more difficult to turn to takeout.

Rethink how you construct your meals. Most people build the meal around a main course (usually meat), says McLaughlin. Instead, start with the vegetables and whole grains, then add a protein to that.

Making over children's diets can be even more challenging than your own. Ann Yelmokas McDermott, a nutrition scientist at Tufts University, suggests overcoming the clean-plate syndrome by serving children small portions, with the option for seconds.

Turning healthful food into a game can help, too. "Kids love gross things and funny names, so you can take things that are normal and just make a funny name for it," says McDermott.

Also try giving children chopsticks. They'll find them fun to eat with, and doing so will slow them down.

Other quick and easy changes for cleaning up your diet:

- Check with your doctor about taking a daily multivitamin.
- When reading nutrition labels, pay as much attention to sodium as fat and calories.
- Switch to whole-wheat bread, including for pizza crust.
- When you splurge, make sure the treat has some redeeming nutritional value. Pick an oatmeal-raisin cookie over chocolate chip.
- Build desserts around fruit. Even if you top it with whipped cream or ice cream, at least you're getting more servings of fruit.
- When eating Asian food, request brown rice instead of white.
- Don't get rid of the snack drawer. Stock it with healthier options.

Added one at a time, these changes don't seem like much. And that's the point. For them to become part of your lifestyle, healthful changes have to be so easy you don't even need to think about them.

"This will not be a rapid weight loss," says Platkin. "You'll make these changes, you won't mind and you'll say suddenly, 'Oh my gosh. I lost weight, and I didn't do anything.' But you did."