

# 10 Diet Myths That Pack On Pounds

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Sorry, Journey, but it's finally time to stop believing ... in weight loss myths at least. Believing popular misconceptions can keep you from taking the right course of action to reach your goals says Julia Valentour, MS, program coordinator and media spokesperson for the American Council on Exercise. Blaming a plateau (or a gain) on any of these half-truths will keep you stuck in your rut and derail your motivation.

Here, 10 of the most pervasive diet-related rumors and the real scoop on how to hit your goal weight for good.

## 1. "Strength training will bulk me up."

First, let's tackle the myth that a pound of muscle weighs more than a pound of fat. A pound is a pound is a pound whether it's made up of muscle or fat. That said, muscle is denser than fat and takes up less room so 2 women who weigh the same can look much different if one has a higher ratio of lean muscle mass to fat, says Valentour. "Muscle weight is a good weight because you look firmer, smaller, and more fit. It's also more metabolically active. Just having more muscle will boost metabolism throughout the day to help keep you leaner."

It's important to incorporate strength training into your routine so you burn calories at an optimal rate all day long. Using heavier weights could help maximize your efforts. Researchers at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis found that working out with heavy weights even for as few as 3-to-6 repetitions increased exercisers' sleeping metabolic rate (the number of calories burned overnight) by nearly 8%. That's enough to lose about 5 pounds in a year even if you did nothing else!

More from Prevention: [Rev Your Fat Burn With This Downloadable \(Free!\) Workout](#)

## 2. "I exercise every day, so I can eat whatever I want."

Would be nice, right? But that's not how it works if you're trying to lose weight, unfortunately. "You can outeat your workout," says Valentour. Even though you burn calories and fat when you exercise, it's often not as much as you think or what the readout on the treadmill tells you.

Valentour recommends eating 250 fewer calories per day and aiming to burn an extra 250 calories a day. That creates enough of a calorie deficit to achieve an average weight loss of a pound a week.

### 3. "It's harder for women to lose weight than for men."

Okay, this one has some basis. Biologically, men are built with more lean muscle mass (the compact, tight muscles that keep metabolism humming) than women are. Meaning his metabolism is working at a 5-to-10% higher rate (even if he's the same height and weight as you) when you're lying on the couch together. Annoying, isn't it?

Another biological challenge women face is that we generally have more body fat than men do and our bodies are more inclined to store it. On top of that, women lose about 1/2 pound of calorie-burning muscle mass a year during perimenopause and sometimes a pound a year during menopause. With the deck stacked against you, why bother trying to fit back in your skinny jeans?

You can do something about these problems. But it's going to take some work. And sweat. Add strength training to your fitness routine at least twice a week to shed fat and build lean muscle mass that will fire up your resting metabolism.

More from Prevention: [Diet Mistakes That Slow Metabolism](#)

### 4. "All calories are equal, so it doesn't matter what I eat."

Ever since you learned what a calorie is, you've been told that they're all alike. Whether you eat 500 calories' worth of celery stalks or cake, your body will burn or store them equally, right? Wrong! New science shows that when it comes to weight loss, calories are nowhere near alike.

Some foods take more work to eat and therefore burn more calories while you're digesting them. Just the act of chewing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean cuts of meat can increase your calorie burn by up to 30%! And then your stomach and intestines do their jobs.

In a Japanese study, researchers found that women who ate the foods that required the most work had significantly slimmer waistlines than those who ate the softest, easiest-to-eat foods. The fiber and protein in such foods take so much effort to digest that your body doesn't absorb some of their calories.

The [Active Calorie Diet](#) is a smart new plan from *Prevention* magazine that takes advantage of all the new knowledge about calories. By choosing more Active Calories and fewer processed foods, you'll set your fat-burning engines on high all day long so you'll lose more weight without feeling hungry.

### 5. "Eating fat will make me fat."

Fat-free products are so-o-o over. There's nothing special about fat that packs on pounds. Getting enough fat in your diet -- the Institute of Medicine recommends that it make up 20 to 35% of calories -- is essential for good health. But the type of fat matters.

Monounsaturated fats -- [MUFAs](#) (pronounced MOO-fahs) for short -- come from the healthy oils found in plant foods such as olives, nuts, and avocados. A report published in the *British Journal of Nutrition* found that a MUFA-rich diet helped people lose small amounts of weight and body fat without changing their calorie intakes.

Another report found that a breakfast high in MUFAs could boost calorie burn for 5 hours after the meal, particularly in people with higher amounts of belly fat. Pair these [delicious healthy fats](#) with a reduced-calorie eating plan and you'll lose weight and reduce belly fat.

Limit saturated fats and avoid trans fats in your diet. Both kinds can cause health problems.

## **6. "Eating at night will make me gain weight."**

Cutting out nighttime snacking is a popular weight loss strategy because it feels logical. Eat less when you're less active. But this topic has been debated for years and a study in the April 2011 journal *Obesity* suggested that eating after 8 PM may increase the risk of obesity. But there aren't clear-cut reasons why.

It's mainly how much you eat -- and not when you eat -- each day that affects weight gain. Many people eat at night out of boredom or other emotions instead of hunger and they wind up consuming more calories than they need for the day (calories that are then stored as fat). Also, people who eat at night may wake up without an appetite and skip breakfast, the meal that helps control calorie intake throughout the day.

To ward off nighttime hunger, eat dinner an hour later, suggests Marjorie Nolan, RD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. You'll save calories by curbing the urge to nosh in front of the TV. "Having dinner a little bit later -- but at least 2 hours before sleeping -- helps prevent mindless snacking, which often happens in the evening," says Nolan.

## **7. "Drinking a ton of water will help me drop pounds."**

Stop hogging the office watercooler (and running to the loo). It's possible that drinking water can aid weight loss efforts. But it won't automatically make you lose weight if you're not changing any other habits. A University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill study found that people who regularly drink water eat nearly 200 fewer calories daily than those who consume only coffee, tea, or soda. And if you sip water instead of sugary drinks, the calories you've saved will help shed pounds.

Drinking ice-cold water can help you burn more calories, too. German researchers found that drinking 6 cups of cold water a day raised resting metabolism by about 50 calories daily (possibly because of the work it takes to warm the fluid up to body temperature). It's up to you to decide whether 50 calories is worth guzzling ice water or whether it would be easier just to take the stairs.

## **8. "Becoming a vegetarian will help me drop a size."**

Eliminating meat from your diet can result in great health benefits. But if you don't follow a vegetarian diet properly, you could accidentally pack on pounds.

Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, author of [The Flexitarian Diet](#), explains common vegetarian beginners' mistakes that may cause weight gain. Vegetarian "types" to avoid becoming:

**Cheese-aholic vegetarians:** They cut out meat from their diets and turn to cheese as a protein source. But cheese is a high-calorie, high-fat food and should be eaten in moderation.

**Faux-meat fixators:** All they eat is boxes of frozen faux meats such as soy chicken nuggets, vegetarian sausage links, and veggie bacon strips. These products are okay once in a while. But they are heavily processed and can have a lot of sodium, resulting in bloating and water retention.

**No-veggie vegetarians:** A lot of vegetarians don't eat enough fruits and vegetables. They eat only grains, beans, and veggie burgers -- all of which can be high in calories.

**Same-meal-minus-the-meat vegetarians:** These people eat the same meals they did before but without the meat. If they're not replacing the protein, they'll probably have a ferocious appetite and may be missing out on essential nutrients.

**"Vegetarian" food label fans:** These people find any recipe or packaging that contains the word "vegetarian" or "meatless" and then overeat that food. They often wind up taking in too much junk food. Be aware that the word "vegetarian" is not synonymous with "healthy" or "low calorie."

Blatner recommends replacing meat with beans in recipes for an easy, healthy, and inexpensive protein source. She advises new vegetarians (and those who want to dabble in a vegetarian diet) to start having fun with [vegetarian recipes](#). "Find ones you like that you're going to keep eating. Enjoy the journey of it."

More from Prevention: [5 Women Who Went Vegetarian And Love It](#)

## 9. "Subbing diet soda and diet foods is a smart way to lose."

Chugging cans of diet soda and eating prepackaged diet foods may seem like a no-brainer way to trick your body into pound-shedding mode because they have few or no calories. But it's not going to give you lasting results.

Diet soda may increase your risk of metabolic syndrome, a group of symptoms that includes high levels of belly fat, blood sugar, and cholesterol. People who consumed just one diet soda daily had a 34% higher risk of the syndrome than those who abstained according to a University of Minnesota study of nearly 10,000 adults ages 45 to 64.

What you're trying to do when you eat diet foods and drink diet soda is to cheat your body, says Ashley Koff, RD, resident dietitian on the new Lifetime show 'Love Handles: Couples in Crisis'.

"The body is physiologically smarter than your ability to override it. If you use one of those things as your tool, you're always going to need that. And you might be getting weight loss results but no health benefits."

She says many people eventually get frustrated that they became dependent on these products.

"My approach across the board is that the best thing you can do is be a 'qualitarian'," says Koff. "Choose the best-quality foods available. The diet versions will have fewer calories than the quality versions, but they'll also have fewer nutrients."

More from Prevention: [14 Diet Foods That Make You Fat](#)

## 10. "Weight gain and belly fat are unavoidable after 40."

Let's be honest here. You're not going to wake up on your 40<sup>th</sup> birthday with a gut and 10 extra pounds on your frame. It does get harder to lose weight as we age. But you can put some healthy habits into practice now to maintain your weight -- or even lose -- as the years pass by.

The years leading up to menopause known as [perimenopause](#) are prime time for weight gain. On average, women put on a pound a year mostly around the waist, according to the Mayo Clinic. Out-of-whack hormones and a slowing metabolism are a couple of the weight gain culprits.

But reaching menopause doesn't have to mean getting plumper. Studies show that the more you work out, the slimmer you'll be even during this transition time. Keep your diet in check and you'll boost your results.

Fine-tune your workouts and eating habits to shed those pounds and keep 'em off with these tips:

- **Exercise at least 4 hours a week.** That amount helped nearly 44,000 women in their 40s or early 50s achieve weight loss instead of weight gain during a 10-year American Cancer Society study.
- **Crank it up for 10 minutes a day.** In a Kaiser Permanente study, a similar group of women who exercised vigorously (by jogging, for instance) for 10-or-more minutes a day had waistlines nearly 6 inches smaller than those of women who didn't raise their heart rates that high.
- **Lift weights.** 2-or-3 sessions a week can help stave off age-related muscle loss which slows your metabolism.
- **Skip the refined carbs.** Women whose diets were high in whole grains and fiber gained less weight than those who ate more sugar and white flour, reports a Danish study.

More from *Prevention*: [10 Fitness Myths Holding You Back](#)