

Five Simple Ways to Lose Weight this Winter

By Richard J. Wolff, RD, LDN

Health professionals are noticing an unhealthy holiday trend. Americans gain weight, but never seem to lose it. In the past, holiday weight gain was always balanced with January weight loss. However, recent trends indicate fewer Americans are choosing to lose weight after the holidays. Despite this trend, there are easy ways to control your weight. Here are five real-life strategies that can make a difference right away:

1. Two Weight-Loss Days per Week

The holiday season presents us with unlimited overeating opportunities. To offset these unplanned extra calories, you need at least two weight-loss days per week. A weight-loss day is simply an intentionally lower-calorie day that balances off your high days. To succeed, you must first commit to your two weight-loss days. I usually pick weekdays because they are more structured. I also like to choose Mondays to get my week off to a strong start. After a successful Monday, I am more likely to bring commitment and focus into my second weight-loss day of the week. To calculate your maintenance calories (the calories required to maintain your weight) multiply your weight by 11 (for men) and by 10 (for women). On a weight-loss day, your total calorie intake should be below your maintenance calories.

2. No Zero Days

The long, cold, dark days of winter can make it tough to manage your weight. One of the most effective weapons in the fight against winter weight gain is “daily” physical activity. I call this “No Zero Days” (doing something daily). Scientists have studied the effects of inactivity and concluded that an inactive lifestyle produces abnormal stress on brain chemistry. This kind of stress can contribute to poor decision-making and more overeating. To support better decision-making, try a 15-minute dose of physical activity every day. Over the years my most successful clients have been those who make a non-negotiable commitment to daily physical activity. Strive for a brisk, 15-minute walk (or comparable activity) every day. You will burn calories and improve brain chemistry for better decision-making!

3. Build a Successful Environment

Your environment is the strongest predictor of what you eat. Therefore, building a successful environment automatically improves your diet. The easiest way to build a successful environment is to “add in” lots of low-calorie, high-nutrition foods. Given our crazy environment, adding in food you can “carry with” helps. I have a food bag that goes almost everywhere with me. I take it to work and it goes with me on the weekend (in my car). My food bag is a small insulated zipper bag. It usually contains several servings of fruit, a nutrition bar and a variety of other good-for-you snacks. Having my food bag around helps me to eat less of the high-calorie stuff that is everywhere these days.

Start building your own successful environment by adding more healthy foods to your home, work and other environments – it will make cutting calories much more automatic.

4. Get Full on Fewer Calories

Most people try to lose weight by eating less. While this sounds good on paper, in reality it's a disaster. Eating less only leaves you hungry and potentially malnourished. A much more effective way to cut calories and lose weight is to get full (fill up) on nutritious, lower calorie foods. The only way to achieve this is to actually “eat more” of these foods. While it seems counterintuitive to “eat more,” this approach really works. Evidence supporting an “eat more” approach comes from dozens of studies on the use of meal replacements over the past 25 years.

A study from Harvard University showed that people using meal replacements over a 10-year period weighed, on average, 32 pounds less than people not using meal replacements. In a nutshell, meal replacements are portion and calorie-controlled foods that help you to fill up (stay full) on fewer calories. They work best when combined with fruits and vegetables. One of my favorite holiday recipes is the HMR hot multigrain cereal topped with a banana, cinnamon and a packet of low-calorie sweetener – it's delicious! Meal replacements come in many forms including shakes, puddings, cereal, entrées, soup and bars. One of the best ways to use meal replacements is to eat them with fruits or vegetables (such as frozen unsweetened fruit added to a meal replacement shake). Adding at least two meal replacements to your daily diet has been shown to promote weight loss in dozens of studies.

5. Put Your Thinking Cap On

Every January hundreds of new, pills, potions and weight loss books hit the shelves. This is ironic given that fewer people are losing weight in January. My advice when it comes to the latest weight-loss aids is to “keep your thinking cap on”. Millions of dollars are wasted every January on weight-loss plans that are completely worthless. Some common sense and discipline could save your wallet and waistline this January.

Several years ago a company marketing “*Exercise in a Bottle*” made nearly 100 million dollars before the Federal Trade Commission stepped in to shut it down. Unfortunately, this happens all the time in America. Don't be duped by the latest high-powered, marketing campaign promising instant weight loss. Start with my real-life strategies and you will be on your way to weight management that works!

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