

The pros and cons of meal replacements

Would you be foolish to try them? Or foolish not to?

If it's a struggle for you to drop unwanted pounds, you might wonder about meal replacements—the liquid drinks, meal bars and portion-controlled meals widely available in supermarkets and elsewhere.

Studies show that substituting one or two daily meals with meal replacements can result in lasting weight loss, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) reports.

A key reason for their effectiveness: Meal replacements take the hassle out of controlling calories and portion sizes.

Even so, they're not for everybody, says Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, speaking for the ADA. Meal replacements—particularly bars and liquid drinks—can become monotonous. Thus, they may be hard for some people to stick with. Also, bars and liquid drinks may not be as satisfying as an actual meal.

Also, while some people use meal replacements indefinitely, most switch back to eating regular meals at some point. And unless you learn new, healthier ways of eating, it may be difficult—once you go off meal replacements—to avoid the poor eating habits that caused you to gain weight in the first place.

That said, "If you do give meal replacements a try because they are convenient and perfectly portioned meals, be sure to read labels," advises Blatner. "Look for those with about 400 calories, 4 grams or less of saturated fat, and under 800 milligrams of sodium. Also aim to add fruits and vegetables to the meals to add more balanced nutrition and fullness."



How to change patterns that pile on pounds

Dieter know thyself

If you want to make pounds disappear, you need to know why you gained them in the first place. And, no, it's not quite as simple as knowing that you consistently consume more calories than you burn. ♦ In all likelihood, "You're carrying extra pounds because you have certain daily habits that cause weight gain," explains Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, an American Dietetic Association (ADA) spokeswoman. ♦ The key to lasting weight loss, she stresses, is to recognize the habits that made your scale move the wrong way—and then modify them. "The diet that worked for your best friend or your hairdresser won't necessarily work for you," she says. ♦ The good news: Recognizing the habits that made you add pounds just got easier. ♦ The credit goes to Blatner, along with Robert Kushner, MD, 2008-2009 president of The Obesity Society, and his wife, nurse practitioner Nancy Kushner. The trio has identified some common eating and exercise patterns that

stand between you and weight loss.

You can read about those patterns—and possible solutions—in their book, *Counseling Overweight Adults: The Lifestyle Patterns Approach and Toolkit* (ADA, 2008), and in the paragraphs that follow. See if you can spot yourself.



YOUR EATING STYLE **1 You're a meal skipper** if you don't eat on a set schedule and often bypass meals. Because you skip meals, you become famished and wolf down any food in sight, even if it's loaded with calories. It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, to hear "research shows that people without a regular meal routine consume roughly 80 more calories every day than those who follow a routine," says Dr. Kushner. Those extra calories add up.

Solution: Set definite times for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and write them down. Remind yourself to eat—for instance, by setting your cell phone alarm. If you aren't hungry at breakfast, eat some-

eat out. As a result, your diet tends to be high in fat, calories and sodium.

Solution: When eating out, limit your calories by sharing entrees and eating smaller portions, such as a single hamburger instead of a hamburger and fries. To make cooking at home easier, write down on index cards three or five ideas for quick, healthy meals. Hang the cards on your refrigerator, and keep the ingredients for those meals on hand.

4 You're a steady snacker if you nibble throughout the day. You're unaware of the extra calories you consume in food and in beverages such as sugary sodas.

Solution: Keep a daily, written log of everything you eat and drink. You'll discover just how much you actually consume while fixing dinner, watching TV and so forth. You'll also be motivated to snack more prudently.

5 You're a fruitless feaster if you mainly eat protein, bread, pasta, desserts and fatty foods but very little produce.

Solution: Do a cart check before leaving the grocery store—that is, be sure that at least half the items in your cart are fruits and vegetables. At home make sure produce is easy to see and eat—for example, by keeping cut-up veggies at eye level in your fridge.

6 You're a hearty portioner if you eat too much food too quickly and don't know when to stop.

Solution: Slow your pace by putting down your fork between bites and chewing thoroughly. To help curb hunger, begin lunch and dinner with a broth-based soup.

7 You're a swing eater if your diet switches from one extreme to another. You try to eat a strict diet of so-called good foods and—inevitably—fall off the wagon. You then either deprive yourself or overindulge and feel guilty.

Solution: Learn to embrace all foods, including the occasional fatty or sugary treat. For example, enjoy that birthday cake at the table with everyone else instead of secretly eating a few pieces later on.

YOUR EXERCISE STYLE **1 You're a couch champion** if you don't like to exercise and have settled into an inactive lifestyle. Given a choice between walking and relaxing, you'll relax every time.

Solution: Sneak exercise into your routine by taking the stairs instead of the esca-

lator or by walking around the mall before shopping. Commit to a modest amount of exercise daily, such as a five-minute walk. Then gradually lengthen your workout.

2 You're an uneasy participant if you're uncomfortable exercising around others, quite likely because your unwanted pounds embarrass you or you're out of shape. As a result, you avoid the gym.

Solution: Work out at home, either with an exercise DVD or home equipment. Also, you might feel less self-conscious exercising away from home if you work out only with members of your own sex.

3 You're an all-or-nothing exerciser if you work out excessively and then do next to nothing because you've burned out.

Solution: Tone it down. Set realistic goals—such as 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week—and stick to them. A moderate exercise program done consistently is better than an inconsistent, intense one.

4 You're a set-routine repeater if you rarely vary your workout. Unfortunately,



your fixed routine can keep your weight at a fixed number.

Solution: Mix it up. For example, if you always work out on a treadmill, try a stair stepper. Vary the intensity of your exercise as well as the type.

5 You're a tender bender if you have a health problem (such as bad knees) or an injury that diminishes your ability to exercise.

Solution: Check with your doctor to see what activity is appropriate. Exercise may decrease your pain and increase your energy and muscle strength. Your doctor will probably tell you to go slowly and to gradually build on what you can do.

6 You're a rain-check athlete if you want to exercise but chronically can't find the time.

Solution: Scrutinize your weekly schedule hour by hour. Very likely you will find openings—even short ones—for exercise. Take a businesslike approach to these openings by treating them as meetings you must attend.

MULTIPLE STYLES One final, essential tip: You may discover that you have more than one eating or exercise style. If so, concentrate first on changing one pattern, then tackle the next.

Makeovers are best achieved in small steps.

Make friends with your scale and a food diary

Trying to slim down? If so, you probably already own three of the most effective tools for permanent weight loss—a scale, some paper and a pen.

Let's start with that scale.

Many of us who carry extra pounds equate our scale with bad news, so we approach it warily or shy away from it altogether.

But when it comes to weight loss, "Your scale is really your best friend," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, speaking for the American Dietetic Association.

Research shows that the more regularly people weigh themselves, the more likely they are to both drop pounds and keep them off, she says.

That's because weighing yourself at least weekly gives you essential feedback. If, for instance, those pounds you've lost are creeping back, you know it. You have a clear signal that you need to eat more wisely or exercise more or do both.

But remember this if you weigh yourself daily: Don't overreact if you gain (or even lose) a pound or two on any given day. Daily weight fluctuations are normal, largely because the amount of water in your body can also fluctuate on a daily basis. What you want to focus on is the trend your scale shows—not a single day's reading.

As for that paper and pen, use them to track what you eat. In one study of nearly 1,700 overweight and obese adults, those who kept daily food diaries lost twice as much weight as those who did not.

Apparently, the very act of writing down what you eat can help you eat less. "You're less likely to eat the cupcake that's tempting you if you know you have to admit on paper that you ate it," explains Blatner.

Some final advice: Be sure to record every bite you eat, including the handful of potato chips you grab on your way to bed. Honesty—in life and in food diaries—is the best policy.

Our online Health Information Library is a great source for weight management tips. Find the library at www.portmed.org/ownyourhealth.

thing light—such as a protein bar and a piece of fruit.

2 You're a nighttime nibbler if you eat most of your daily calories from dinnertime onward. As a result, you wake up in the morning without any appetite and eat very little throughout the day. In the evening you're ravenous and the cycle repeats.

Solution: Spread your calories throughout the day. A good way to start, since you're usually not hungry in the morning, is to eat a small lunch. Eventually, you can add a modest breakfast to your daily diet. Also, rid your home of all high-calorie foods, such as chips and cookies. You can't eat what's not available, no matter how accustomed you are to snacking in the evening. You might also try decreasing how much you eat at dinner, which will help make you hungry in the morning.

3 You're a convenient diner if you typically eat food that is ready-made, packaged, frozen or microwaveable. Often you