

# FOOD DIARY - the Weight Loss Trigger



Studies show that people who keep food diaries lose more weight and keep more of that weight off in the long run. The National Weight Control Registry (USA) – an ongoing research project tracking more than 3,000 people who've lost an average of 66 pounds and kept it off for five years – found that keeping a food diary is the one strategy used by the majority of successful dieters. In fact, in a study of 685 dieters conducted by a health insurance company, *the best predictor of weight loss throughout the first year was the number of food records kept per week.*

## Why keep a food diary?

- Tracking the food we consume forces us to take responsibility for our food choices. It shows what we're *really* eating.
- An accurate food diary helps us see eating patterns, giving us insight into when and why we eat.
- Monitoring the foods we eat helps us estimate calorie intake, so we can make adjustments, by eating less or exercising more.

If you're beginning a program to change your habits, start with a **baseline food diary** that keeps track of a "typical" week of food choices and exercise. This way, you'll have a better handle on what you need to work on - problem times or situations, circumstances that make it difficult to eat healthy, and so on. The level of detail you record depends on your goals, but some possible things to jot down include:

- **What** you eat and **how much** you eat: You can estimate portions, but **be honest** and **be thorough** - don't forget items such as candy, condiments, etc. Record as you go to ensure accuracy.
- **When** and **where** you eat: Time of day, how long you were eating, if you ate in a fast-food restaurant or the company cafeteria, etc.
- **Who** you were with and any **other activity** you were involved in: Were you reading or watching TV, or having brunch with your best friend?
- **Your mood** while eating: Were you bored, frustrated, happy? This may tell you whether you engage in emotional eating - eating triggered by mood, not hunger.
- Any **exercise** you did, including the activity, length and intensity, and estimate of calories burned.
- Any **special categories** for which you want to monitor consumption, such as carbohydrates, fat, or fibre content.

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Once you have a baseline diary, you can set priorities for what to work on. Do you eat well when eating by yourself, but go overboard when you're with friends? Does the routine of a workday keep you in line, while the freedom of the weekend weakens your willpower? Do you subsist on convenience foods that are heavy on processing but light on nutrients and real taste? Important things to consider include:

- What is your real motivation for eating? Are you truly hungry when you eat or are you eating for emotional reasons?
- Do you eat well-balanced meals with reasonable serving sizes? If not, map out the changes you'd like to make.
- Do you eat at appropriate intervals, or do you eat a little and then overindulge later? It may seem counterintuitive, but eating smaller amounts more often may keep your energy high, and prevent overeating.

A food diary allows you to compare your habits to the healthy habits recommended by experts: getting 25 grams of fibre a day, limiting fat intake to 35 percent of your total calorie intake, and consuming fewer calories than your body burns daily. You can then continue to track what's important to you - whether it involves elaborate detail or very simple information.

Keeping a food diary can make us uncomfortable because doing so forces us to recall things we'd rather not take note of - that chocolate shake we had for lunch, or that extra mound of mashed potatoes we regretted as soon we inhaled it. In other words: no pain, no gain. When you see the foods you've eaten listed in black-and-white, you can't wish them away. But pain, even metaphorical pain, *can* be the impetus for change - and if used consistently, a food diary can be the instrument of that change.