

# The secret to weight-loss success

WHAT IF YOU'RE DOING EVERYTHING RIGHT—AND THE SCALE'S NOT BUDGING? **fitness** VISITS A CALORIE CLAIRVOYANT.

BY LEAH McLAUGHLIN



If you love to eat large portions, fill up on salads but minimize high-fat dressings.

**A**S THE NUTRITION DIRECTOR AT FITNESS MAGAZINE, I'm the resident expert on healthy eating and losing weight. My coworkers constantly bombard me with all sorts of questions about fat grams and carb counts; for the most part, I'm at the ready with an answer. So when it came to inspecting my own diet, I fully expected to be able to whittle away enough calories to lose a few pounds before bathing-suit season. Fat chance.

On the days I “treated” myself, I ended up snacking even more.

I started keeping an online food diary and was shocked to see that I was consistently over-eating. Whenever I exceeded my 1,820-calorie-a-day limit, a sad-face graphic would appear next to the day’s total. After almost a week of seeing Mr. Sad Face, I still couldn’t figure out how to meet my mark. I had already lightened my daily menu by cooking at home more and bringing the leftovers—usually soup or salad—to work. I had been keeping a bowl of apples on my desk to cut down on candy rounds. And while my job often requires me to visit new restaurants, I’d been making an effort to order only those items that sounded leanest.

In fact, nothing in my diary popped out at me as being especially—and I hate this word—“fattening.” Sure, I tended to snack when on deadline, but my choices were all fairly respectable and wholesome—small handfuls of nuts, some fruit. I needed some guidance.

#### WHAT I WAS DOING WRONG

Enter Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., a professor of nutrition at New York University. Her new book, *The Portion Teller: Smartsizes Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss* (Morgan Road Books, 2005), hit my desk at a moment when I was feeling particularly frustrated. It wasn’t yet 3 p.m., and I had only 200 calories left if I was going to keep Mr. Sad Face at bay. The thought of eating a few fat-free pretzels and a tablespoon of hummus for dinner was disheartening, to say the least. *The Portion Teller* is a how-to guide to cutting calories, no matter how much you love food. The secret to trimming portions, says Young, lies in discovering your eating personality—and then working with it rather than against it.

At first I’d thought the book title was cute,

if a little hokey, but when I met the author, I found out why she calls herself “the Portion Teller.” She quietly looked over printouts of my diary entries as if she were reading tea leaves. Then she took out a red pen and circled a snack that appeared on all three pages: “one package reduced-fat vanilla creme cookies.” I admitted that although they weren’t my favorite (Toll-house chocolate chip holds that honor), they were the only diet-friendly option in the office vending machine, so why not treat myself? “Because for you it’s not a real treat,” Young explained. “A full-fat cookie would satisfy you much more, so you wouldn’t be as inclined to munch throughout the rest of the day.”

#### LOOKING FOR CLUES

She was on to something. A closer look at my food diary revealed that on the days I “treated” myself, I tended to snack on highly caloric foods like nuts. On weekends, when I allowed myself the occasional indulgence (like dessert), I hardly ever munched. Based on this info, Young branded me a “restrained eater,” someone who regularly refuses certain foods because she believes she’ll gain weight.

Being a restrained eater may sound like a good thing, especially if you want to cut calories, but for me it was all wrong. For one thing, I love high-fat foods. (At the age of four, I used to snack on butter!) Plus, I consider myself a bit of a purist. I like to cook from scratch and rarely eat anything that comes out of a box. When I pull the vending-machine lever for that artificially flavored reduced-fat version of a real cookie, I don’t feel like I’m indulging, and that’s why my cravings are never satisfied.

Changing one thing at a time, like swap-



## The right calorie-cutting strategy for you

### YOU’RE A: LOPSIDED EATER

**IF YOU:** Prefer one food group (like grains and breads) over another (like vegetables)

### CUT CALORIES BY:

Ensuring that every meal includes the missing food groups plus a controlled portion of your favorite food, so you get to enjoy it all day. Here’s a primer: Starch, fruit and dairy servings should be about half a cup; proteins should be roughly the size of your palm. Fats like peanut butter, vinaigrettes and sauces should be just a tablespoon.

### YOU’RE A: CAN’T-LIVE- WITHOUT-IT EATER

**IF YOU:** Have an unusual attachment to one specific high-calorie food (like chocolate or cheeseburgers)

### CUT CALORIES BY:

“Smartsizing” your favorite food. Buy individually wrapped chocolates instead of a whole bar, portion out a three-ounce burger and choose a flavorful reduced-fat cheese. Balance the calories by minimizing other high-calorie items that aren’t as important to you.

### YOU’RE A: VOLUME EATER

**IF YOU:** Love to eat large portions and usually need a lot of food to feel full

### CUT CALORIES BY:

Choosing large amounts of low-calorie vegetables, salads and soups, and limiting your portions of higher-calorie items, like dressings, sauces and fatty meats. Eat whole fruits instead of drinking juices.

### YOU’RE A: RESTRAINED EATER

**IF YOU:** Always tell yourself you can’t have a certain food even when it’s something you love.

### CUT CALORIES BY:

Lightening up (literally and figuratively)! Focus on enjoying the foods you love even if this means eating small portions of so-called “bad” foods, like creamy, full-fat Brie. The less deprived you feel, the more successful you’ll be at reaching your weight-loss goal.

DIET

If a food  
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portion  
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ping a food you find meaningful (Tollhouse cookie) for one you don't (reduced-fat impostor), is a key element in Young's portion-control counseling. "If you want to lose weight, you need to cut calories in ways you can live with," she says. But what if the foods you love are also your "trigger" foods? For example, I have a friend who can't stop eating chocolate once she starts. She can plow through a box of Russell Stover candy in a lunch hour. "If a food is a proven portion disaster, then you may have to banish it completely," says Young.

#### DISCOVER YOUR PORTION PERSONALITY

Before you can determine what kind of eater you are, you need to keep a detailed food diary. It's the only way to honestly assess how you eat—what times of day you choose to snack, what foods you're drawn to and why. For a full week—including the weekend—record everything you eat, even the scraps off your kids' plates. Note precise times and specific emotions you feel at each snack or meal.

Examine each day's entry with a critical eye and look for patterns. It might be helpful for you to set your diary aside for a few days so you can be more objective. Some of us are what Young calls "volume eaters"—people who love big portions. (I also happen to be one of these.) If you favor buffet-style dinners, this might describe you. Others are "lopsided eaters"—those who prefer one food group, like bread, over all of the others. If your diary is peppered with sandwiches, wraps and slices of pizza, you're probably a lopsided eater. The chart on page 88, "The Right Calorie-Cutting Strategy for You," explains each one of Young's distinct eating-personality types and offers a calorie-cutting strategy to match.

#### PUTTING THE TELLER TO THE TEST

After meeting with Young, I scrutinized my diary again for items I didn't absolutely adore. Breakfast was a standout. I'd been eating cereal every day for a week, mostly because a grain company had sent me several samples (I don't even really like cereals). Young's estimation of my cereal portions was staggering: four or five grain servings per bowl, with a total calorie count of 450. I decided to test her theory the next morning by replacing the cereal with my favorite breakfast: an egg sandwich. There wasn't much difference in calories—the sandwich totaled about 400—but my urge to snack was markedly diminished as the day went on. I didn't raid my coworker's raisin stash, and I skipped the three o'clock vending-machine stop. By the time I got home, I could look forward to a serving of homemade macaroni and cheese, sans guilt. Good-bye, Mr. Sad Face! •



LISA YOUNG, PH.D., R.D.

A professor of nutrition at NYU and the author of *The Portion Teller* (Morgan Road Books, 2005), Young helped our nutrition director find her calorie-cutting formula in "The Secret to Weight-Loss Success," page 86. "Browsing her food diary gave me the right clues," says Young.