We don't like telling you what you have to do—you can make your own smart decisions. But we're making an exception here. Follow these basic rules and you *will* drop pounds. We promise.

LOSE WEIGHT NOW
KEEP IT OFF FOREVER

by kimberly a. daly ● photography by chris fanning

Diet fads come and go. So forget carb-cutting and cabbage-only regimens that leave you feeling tired and cranky—the trick to lasting weight loss is to find a way of eating that's calorie conscious and works with your lifestyle. "Many women still feel frustrated and confused about how to lose weight and not gain it back," says James O. Hill, Ph.D., director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado, Denver. "But one thing has never changed: You need to take in fewer calories than you're burning daily." To help you make this mandate fit your life, we've picked the brains of top diet experts to come up with some simple guidelines that are guaranteed to work today, tomorrow, and yes, next year too.

These tips make getting **SLIM** almost effortless

pump up the volume

Sure, you need to think about fat and calories when considering a meal or snack. "But a food's air and water content, or volume, is important too," says Barbara Rolls, Ph.D., a nutrition professor at Penn State and author of *The Volumetrics Eating Plan*. **"High-volume foods can fill you up with fewer calories."** For example, you might not find 100 calories of raisins (about ¼ cup) as satisfying as 100 calories of grapes (about 1 cup). In one study, Rolls noticed people who ate a salad piled high with fresh produce consumed 8 percent fewer calories—but felt just as full—as those who had one loaded with higher-density (and lower-volume) toppings, like cheese and dressing. For volume without the calorie hit, opt for fiber-rich fruits and veggies.

don't drink your calories

➡ The average American gets 22 percent of her daily calories (roughly 350) from drinks, but our bodies aren't registering those calories as food. **"Liquids travel too quickly through your stomach for your brain to notice the calorie consumption,"** says Kleiner. But beverages add up: A study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that people who cut sugary drinks out of their diet lost one pound more after six months than those who slashed the same amount of calories from food. And sodas aren't the only drinks to be wary of, says Bob Harper, a trainer on NBC's *The Biggest Loser*. "You could burn 200 calories exercising for 30 minutes and then put them right back into your body by sipping a sports drink or sugar-filled latte."
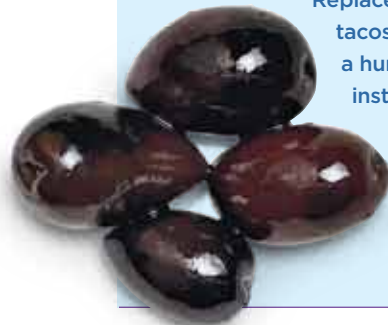
HOT TIP
Ice water is a negative calorie drink—your body burns calories warming it up

> "
> Lack of sleep puts your body under stress, and when that happens it holds on to fat.
> "

snooze more to lose more

➡ Forcing yourself out of bed for an early-morning workout seems like a good thing, but if you're not logging enough shut-eye, you could be sabotaging your weight-loss efforts. New research from the University of Chicago reveals that **skimping on zzz's while you're dieting causes your body to lose more water, muscle, and other tissue—instead of fat—which slows your metabolism.** "Also, lack of sleep puts your body under stress," says Susan Kleiner, Ph.D., R.D., owner of High Performance Nutrition in Mercer Island, Washington, "and when that happens, it holds on to fat." Plus, it can increase your body's production of ghrelin, an appetite-boosting hormone (hello, weight gain!). According to a study from Case Western Reserve University, people who average less than five hours of sleep a night are 9 percent more likely to become obese than those who snooze for at least six. To make sure you get enough sleep, wind down by meditating or stretching and hit the hay at least eight hours before your wake-up call.

pair up to pare down

Protein, from meats, beans, and nuts, and fiber, found in whole-wheat bread and produce, are stay-slim staples. And when you eat them together, these meal building blocks pack a powerful one-two punch to keep you full. "Fiber absorbs water and swells up in your stomach, taking up space," says Kleiner, a SHAPE advisory board member. **"And protein sends a hormone signal to your body that makes you feel satiated."** Your body uses protein to build lean muscle, while fiber can help flatten your abs. A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* shows that people following a diet that combines the two are more inclined to lose or maintain weight. Most likely because they don't experience blood sugar spikes that can lead to bingeing. Make sure all of your meals and snacks contain both fiber and protein, like turkey with veggies on whole-wheat bread for lunch and blueberries with nonfat yogurt as an afternoon snack.

veg out once a week

Nutritionists like to joke that no one ever got fat eating carrots. And there's some truth to that. A study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* reports **vegetarians are 15 percent less likely to be overweight or obese than their meat-eating friends.** That's because vegetarians tend to take in fewer calories and fat, and more fruits and vegetables. But you don't have to go cold-turkey on the, uh, turkey to see a benefit. Try going meatless once a week: Replace ground beef in tacos with beans, or have a hummus sandwich instead of your usual ham and Swiss. The payoff is a more exciting dinner plate—and a slimmer waist.

FRUIT IS FILLING
It's got hunger-taming fiber. But watch out for juice—you don't want to sip too many calories

front-load your calories

➡ You've heard it a million times: Don't skip breakfast. Still, many women claim they don't have time. Maybe this will convince you: "Eating first thing revs your calorie burn," explains Harper, who created our Bikini Body Countdown workout (page 160). "If you don't eat within two hours of waking, your metabolism can slow down to conserve energy." And that's *never* a good thing! Noshing early gives you energy and bolsters your willpower, making it easier to resist the pastries at that a.m. meeting and stay on track all day. In fact, researchers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture found **dieters who eat a larger morning meal are more successful at losing body fat than those who don't make breakfast a priority.** "Most women should aim to get 300 to 400 calories at breakfast," says Harper. In a scramble to get out the door? Do a little prep work: On Sunday, whip up a batch of hard-boiled eggs (80 calories each), and pair one with a pack of instant oatmeal made with nonfat milk and mashed banana (about 290 calories). "The protein fends off hunger," says Harper, "and the carbs energize you."

make friends with fat

Fat has more than twice the calories of carbs or protein, so it may seem like it's the thing to trim when you're trying to drop pounds. But calories aren't the only piece of the weight-loss puzzle. "Your body needs fat to function," says Kleiner. **"When you don't get enough in your diet, your brain sends a signal to your cells to hold on to body fat."** This means you might need to go against logic and actually *increase* your fat intake in order to slim down for good. Need some concrete evidence? A recent study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that women who ate a moderate-fat diet (35 percent of calories) shed an average of 13 pounds more—and kept them off—than those on a lowfat plan. Another good reason to keep fat in the mix: "It takes your body longer to digest fat than other nutrients," says Kleiner. "And that helps to fend off hunger and binges."

Still, the type of fat matters. Look to plant sources like olive oil, nuts, and avocados, as well as fish, for healthy polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Meat, cheese, and whole milk are high in saturated fat, which can raise your risk of heart disease—so think of juicy steaks and dairy as treats. And assuming you're eating 1,600 calories a day, aim to keep your daily intake of fat around 62 grams, or 560 calories.

SNACK PACKIN'
Bringing your own means you're less likely to succumb to the drive-thru

HOT TIP
An ounce of nuts has around 170 calories plus healthy fats, fiber, and protein to satisfy you

> "
> It takes your body longer to digest fat than other nutrients. And that helps to fend off hunger and binges.
> "

make food the main event

"People are so unaware of what they're putting into their mouths," says Kleiner, "especially when they're eating in front of a computer or the TV." And who isn't guilty of doing that? A study in *Public Health Nutrition* shows that **Americans spend more time eating while distracted than they did 30 years ago.** But when you don't pay attention to your food, you consume more—whether you're engrossed in an episode of *Glee* or talking to friends. "Our stomachs don't recognize we're full when our minds aren't focused on the meal," says Rolls. In an ideal world you would be able to sit and linger at a table with a well-balanced meal in front of you three times a day—but trying to force that into a day that includes hitting the gym, going to work, and running errands isn't realistic. Rolls recommends carving out time to sit down and eat at least one "mindful" meal per day. If you know that you have to work through lunch, take bites between emails and make a conscious effort to savor each one.

go ahead, have that cookie

A study in the journal *Obesity* shows that women who said they followed a rigid diet were 19 percent more likely to be overweight than those with a more flexible eating plan. **"When you've got an all-or-nothing mentality, you're setting yourself up to fail,"** says Hill. "Often, one slipup will leave you feeling defeated and cause you to give up." Instead, indulge every once in a while. Kleiner suggests giving yourself five "get out of my diet free" cards weekly, but limit yourself to one portion: For example, share a slice of birthday cake with a co-worker on Monday, have a piece of chocolate with your nonfat latte on Tuesday, and eat a fried mozzarella stick at happy hour on Thursday. "One thing people hate about diets is the expected deprivation," says Harper. "Knowing you can have a treat takes the D-word out of the picture and makes it much easier to stick with healthy choices most of the time."

be a food sleuth

A package or menu may claim that a food is "reduced-calorie," but that doesn't mean it's a smart pick. **"When we see these good-for-you claims—low-carb, heart-healthy, or organic, for instance—we believe we can get away with eating more,"** says Lisa R. Young, Ph.D., R.D., an adjunct nutrition professor at New York University. Indeed, in a Cornell University study, researchers found diners at a "healthy" restaurant underestimated their meals by nearly 200 calories. Still, even when participants in another Cornell University study were given more nutritional info—including the amount of fat and calories per serving—about a snack labeled "lowfat," many munched 50 percent more than one portion. That means it's on you to find out exactly what you're getting. Do your homework before that lunch date: Browse the restaurant's website to see how many calories you'll really be eating. In grocery stores, turn over the package and read the full nutritional details to help you plan meals and snacks.

downsize your dishes

Counting calories is the primary tenet of weight loss, but it goes hand-in-hand with portion control. **"We tend to over-consume because we often 'eat with our eyes'—if we can see it on our plate, our brains think we need to finish it,"** says Young. To keep servings in check, use a smaller plate. Researchers at Cornell University found people who ate hamburgers off saucers believed they were eating an average of 20 percent more calories than they really were, while those who ate off 12-inch plates thought they'd eaten less and weren't as satisfied. So put your main meal on a salad dish instead.
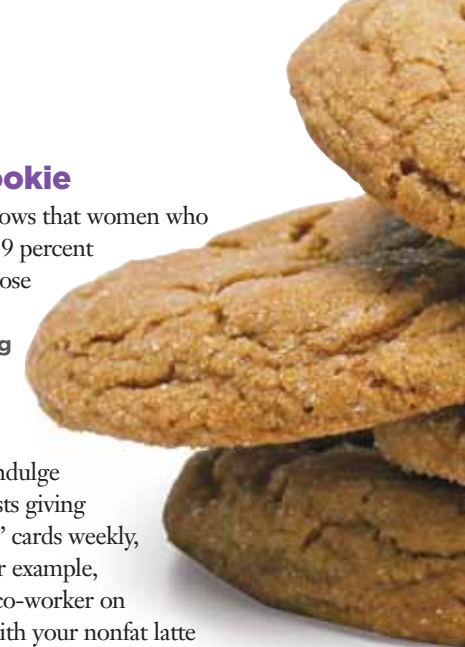
think your way slim

The best nutritionist in the world can't help you lose weight if your brain isn't in the game. Here are some simple solutions to help you get with the program:

- **Make it *your* choice** "If you're not mentally ready to make healthy decisions, you won't be able to stick with any diet or exercise plan," says Bob Harper of NBC's *The Biggest Loser*. Remember *you're* in control—no one is forcing you to do anything.

- **Be realistic** "It's almost impossible to transform your diet in one day," says Harper. "When you start with a smaller goal, like eating breakfast every day for two weeks, there's a better chance you'll reach it." And the confidence boost you get from doing that will propel you into hitting your next mark—say, having a healthy or "mindful" lunch too.

- **Tame the hunger in your head** "A lot of us eat out of boredom, when we're stressed, or when we're feeling down," says Lisa R. Young, Ph.D., R.D., an adjunct nutrition professor at New York University. Next time you reach for a snack, take a moment to decide if you're actually hungry. And rather than feed your feelings, try going for a walk, chatting with a friend, or writing in a journal instead.

- **Find some support** "Dieters who join a community of people with like-minded health goals tend to be more successful," says Chris Downie, author of *The Spark: The 28-Day Breakthrough Plan for Losing Weight, Getting Fit, and Transforming Your Life*. "Having someone to talk to when you fall off the wagon gives you a better shot at getting back on it."