ATTACK
OF THE DIET SABOTEURS
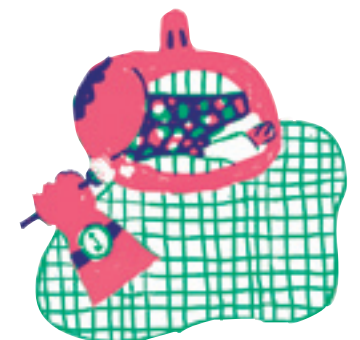
BY Matthew Kadey, RD
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JooHee Yoon

WATCHING YOUR WAISTLINE? DON'T FALL INTO ANY OF THESE SNEAKY TRAPS

When pondering the dietary missteps that keep people from achieving their health and weight-loss goals, the usual suspects often come to mind: eating out too often, late-night snacking, and coffee-and-croissant "breakfasts." Yet, recent research has found some less-obvious reasons for calorie overload. If you resolve to achieve better middle management in the New Year, we'll show you some common behaviors that could be standing between you and your ideal weight, and offer expert tips to help you steer clear and reach your goal.

1. FAST-AND-FURIOUS EATING »

These days it's easy to dine and dash. But scarfers beware: speeding through meals and snacks could hinder your slim-down efforts. A study published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* in 2014 found that normal-weight people who ate lunch in 9 minutes consumed an average of 88 more calories and felt less full one hour later than those who lingered over lunch for a full 22 minutes. "When you shovel in your food, it's easy to not pay attention, making it easy to overeat," says Lisa R. Young, PhD, RD, adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University and author of *The Portion Teller Plan*. On the flip side, she says, pacing yourself gives your brain a chance to register satiety signals, so you're less likely to overeat during meals and snack needlessly between them.

Since slowing down may help you slim down, implement habits that force you to eat at a more leisurely pace. "Try taking smaller bites, putting down your utensils after each bite, and then thoroughly chewing your food," advises Young. British researchers discovered people who chewed each bite of a meal for at least 30 seconds consumed half as many candies two hours afterward as those who chewed at a faster pace. Also set yourself up to savor meals and snacks by enjoying them free of distractions such as the television or the stream of alerts on your smartphone. Make your dining environment more pleasant by softening the lighting and playing mellow music. And if all else fails, Young suggests breaking out the chopsticks, which will surely slow the pace.

2.
SHOPPING WHILE FAMISHED ≫

Recent research at Cornell University found that people who grocery-shopped on an empty stomach filled their carts with 45 percent more high-calorie foods such as candy than those who had a snack shortly before hitting the aisles. It's an evolutionary adaptation for our brains to tell us to seek out calorie-dense foods when we're hungry, says study co-author Aner Tal, PhD, research associate at the Cornell Food and Brand Lab. "By purchasing more snack foods, you could be setting yourself up for several days of higher-calorie eating," he adds. Shopping hungry with coupons in hand could make matters worse: a study published in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease* in 2014 discovered that 25 percent of grocery coupons are geared toward processed snack foods, candies, and desserts, with no more than 3 percent for fruits or vegetables.

To keep your basket full of healthful foods (and more money in your wallet), Bonnie Taub-Dix, RDN, a New York–based dietitian and author of *Read It Before You Eat It*, recommends having a snack that provides protein, fiber, and healthful fats shortly before getting behind the wheels of a shopping cart. "This could be almond butter on whole-grain crackers or a whole-food-based bar like KIND," notes Taub-Dix, who also suggests sipping a calorie-free drink such as water or tea while shopping to help keep your hands occupied. "Shopping with a detailed food list and a commitment to stick with it will also go a long way to keep impulse buys like candy bars out of your cart," she adds.
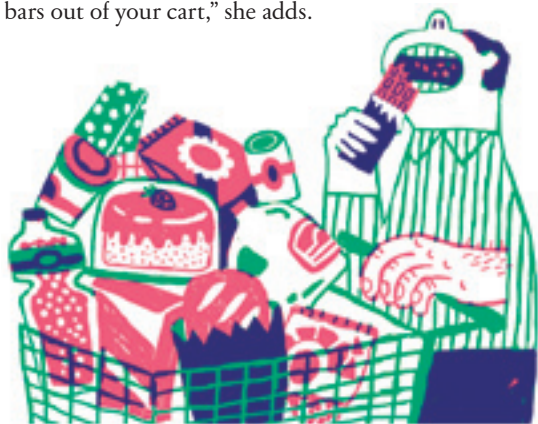
3.
CUTTING LOOSE ON THE ≫ WEEKENDS

Allowing a small amount of dietary indulgence throughout the workweek might be a better approach than saving it up for the weekend.

Too often we think a workweek of clean eating entitles us to reach for the cookie jar more often over the weekend. But a study in the journal *Obesity* found that people who ramped up their calorie intake for two days (think Saturday and Sunday) failed to reduce their intake enough during the following four days to compensate for the extra calories. The net result: overall calorie gain. Further, those who stuffed themselves reported increased cravings and hunger (and being in a worse mood) on subsequent days. Repeat this pattern weekend after weekend, and you could see the needle on the scale moving to the right.

For many people, allowing a small amount of dietary indulgence throughout the workweek might be a better approach, says Young. "Enjoying about 100 calories each day of a cheat food won't wreck your diet and can help keep you on track during the weekends," she explains. And don't beat yourself up for nibbling on a couple of cookies or dark chocolate squares. Research shows that feeling guilty after having a treat can lessen willpower in the face of additional dietary temptations. Also, meal planning is just as important on the weekends as it is during the workweek to help you dodge poor meal and snack choices.

If snack foods such as potato chips and cookies are labeled "organic," we often assume they're lower in calories than their non-organic counterparts.

4.
FALLING FOR HEALTH HALOS ≫

Food manufacturers have long known what research now proves: certain eco- and health-oriented labeling or packaging can sway us to buy less than nutritionally stellar food products. Case in point: a Cornell University study found that if snack foods such as potato chips and cookies are labeled "organic," we often assume they're lower in calories than their non-organic counterparts. Similarly, in a study published in the journal *Health Communication*, individuals believed a candy bar was healthier when it sported green rather than red or white packaging, despite the fact that all three options contained the same number of calories. Another study, in the journal *Appetite*, discovered that participants felt less guilty about eating larger portions of items that displayed fitness-oriented labelling. Even a "low-fat" label can cause people to let their guard down and forget to mind their portions.

Look past certifications and marketing maneuvers, and focus on the fine print, advises Taub-Dix: "The back of a package where you find the ingredients list and nutrition facts panel basically tells you all you need to know about the nutritional merits of a product." In fact, researchers at Washington State University found that people who take the time to scan these details are more likely to be successful at weight loss.

Look past certifications and marketing maneuvers, and focus on the fine print.

5.
EATING FAMILY STYLE

Here's more evidence that it's never a good idea to keep a bowl of chocolate-covered almonds on your desk. A Cornell University study found that diners who placed serving dishes that included pasta and pudding on the dining table within easy reach ate up to 29 percent more calories than those who had to get up from the table to score a second helping.

According to Young, this research shows that eating family style or taking a bag of potato chips with you to the couch is not conducive to portion control. She recommends doling out reasonable portions of food onto a plate or into a bowl and then placing the rest at a distance such as on the stove top or in the pantry: "This will force you to think harder about whether you really need a second helping to feel satisfied."

≫

6.
DRINKING YOUR CALORIES

While a daily green smoothie or morning OJ won't derail your diet, don't overdo it. A study published in the journal *Obesity* exposed people to the same number of calories in liquid or solid form, and found that post-meal hunger was greater in subjects who consumed liquid calories. "A solid meal leads to a greater drop in levels of the hunger-inducing hormone ghrelin, which could help put the brakes on overeating later on," says the study's lead author, Heather Leidy, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology at the University of Missouri. "It seems the body doesn't register 300 liquid calories in the same way it does if those 300 calories came in the form of whole food." Leidy recommends capping your daily intake of liquid nutrition such as homemade smoothies to a single serving and making sure no more than 10 percent of daily calories come from sugar-added beverages such as sweetened teas or coffee drinks.
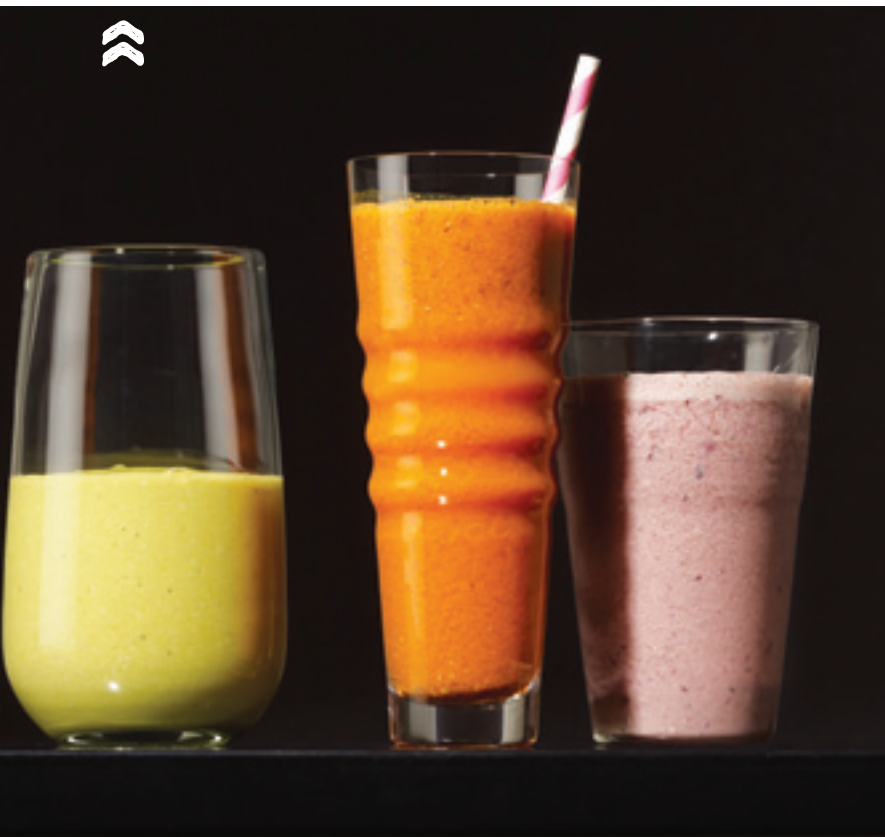
A lack of pillow time can increase the brain activity that responds to food stimuli, making you more likely to give in to cravings and forget the concept of portion control.

7.
BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL

Night owls take note: skimping on shut-eye may not do your waistline any favors. A study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* discovered that volunteers who slept for eight hours consumed an average of 22 percent fewer calories and experienced less hunger the following day than those who caught only four hours of Z's. A lack of pillow time can increase the brain activity that responds to food stimuli, making you more likely to give in to cravings and forget the concept of portion control.

About 60 percent of Americans report they don't get enough daily sleep to feel rested, which is likely a contributing factor to our expanding girths. To keep your hand out of the cookie jar, work on nailing the recommended eight-hour sleep quota. Set yourself up to turn in earlier: perform essential tasks such as responding to e-mails or assembling school lunches earlier in the evening.

8.
SKIPPING PROTEIN AT BREAKFAST

Cereal, toast, fruit—breakfast is a notoriously carb-centric meal. But studies show that forgoing protein at your morning meal can compromise appetite control and increase snacking later in the day. It's thought that bumping up the protein in your "most important meal of the day" can quell hunger-inducing hormones and slow digestion. Both of which can put the kibosh on overeating throughout the day.

Taub-Dix suggests fueling up on protein-rich nut butters, hummus, ricotta cheese (try it on a whole-grain toaster waffle with some berries), or Greek-style yogurt. High-protein hemp hearts sprinkled on your oatmeal can also do the trick.

Exercise is a key part of the weight-loss equation, but don't use it as an excuse to overeat.

9.
REWARDING EXERCISE

It's all too easy to justify eating a larger portion at dinner or an extra slice of dessert afterward because you're keeping up a daily exercise routine. Surely you're burning off those calories, right? Well, it turns out we often overestimate the number of calories we burn during exercise, which can lead to letting our guard down when it comes to portion control. A study by British researchers published in 2014 found that subjects presented with a buffet after exercising ate about twice as many calories as they had burned during the workout. Further, a study in the journal *Appetite* found that taking part in "fat-burning" exercise can increase post-workout food intake. The researchers speculate that people may view a workout as a licence to reward themselves.

Exercise is a key part of the weight-loss equation, but don't use it as an excuse to overeat. To lose weight, you need to create a daily calorie deficit, so try working with a trainer or dietitian who can help you track calories in and calories out. And make your workouts something you enjoy, such as taking a brisk walk in the park. Researchers at Cornell University found that people who viewed their exercise as "fun" ate less afterward than those who thought of their workout as, well, a workout. Thinking of exercise as a chore can lead to feeling less happy about the experience and, in turn, less dietary restraint afterward. ✎

Matthew Kadey, RD, is a 2013 winner of the James Beard Award for food journalism.