

8 Simple Reasons You're Gaining Weight—and How to Stop

You'd never guess some of these surprising causes of weight gain. We reveal eight calorie-promoting culprits—and the secrets to dropping the pounds for good

BY CLAIRE SULMERS

BIG FAT PROBLEM: You're just not getting enough sleep at night.

1 That's right. Skipping on sleep may be just as good for strapping saddlebags on your thighs as it is for dumping bags under your eyes. "The production of leptin and ghrelin—two hormones tied to food intake—is influenced by how much you sleep. Leptin sends a signal out to your brain that you're full, and ghrelin stimulates the appetite," explains Karen Brewton, a registered dietitian with Methodist Hospital in Houston, Texas. But people who are sleep-deprived may have lower leptin or satisfaction levels, higher ghrelin or appetite levels, and higher amounts of body fat, according to a study that came out of the University of Chicago Medical Center.

SLIM-DOWN STRATEGY: Ditch some bad habits that may be keeping you up late, such as watching TV or working on your computer in the bedroom. "That interferes with your ability to unwind and get in the proper mood to sleep," says Brewton. And instead of trying to turn in two hours early all of a sudden, start scaling back your bedtime, say by about 15 minutes each day.

BIG FAT PROBLEM: You've got a social life.

2 Your clothes have started to feel a little snug ever since you got with a new guy who takes you out to restaurants and buys you chocolate. "In a new relationship, a common denominator is social eating. You go out for drinks or dinner," says Madelyn Fernstrom, Ph.D., a certified nurse and director of the Weight Management Center of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. "All those extra excursions and calories can make the scale creep upward," she says.

SLIM-DOWN STRATEGY: Focus on the physical with your guy and plan active dates together instead of food-centric ones. "Take a walk in the park or go bowling or even head out to an ice-skating rink," recommends Fernstrom. Burn calories with your man instead of packing them on, and all year long you'll be able to fit into that cute little number you snagged him with.



Snacking on the fly at work adds pounds.

BIG FAT PROBLEM: Your hormones are in overdrive.

3 Ever notice how you reach for anything fatty and yummy before your period? Premenstrual hormonal changes can stimulate your appetite for sweet and salty foods. Another significant impact: the hormonal shift that happens during menopause when your estrogen levels decline. "Fat cells in your body produce estrogen, so your body works harder to convert calories into fat to increase estrogen levels," explains Brewton. "Unfortunately, fat cells don't burn calories the way muscle cells do. And that can contribute to weight gain."

SLIM-DOWN STRATEGY: When your body craves fat, find low-cal ways to satisfy it. Try eating Nabisco 100 Calorie Packs or sucking on a lollipop. Menopause the problem? Log in some extra time working out to burn those extra calories.

BIG FAT PROBLEM: You don't make enough trips to the grocery store.

4 "One concern with choosing less healthy food to eat is that you do it when your main stocks of home-cooked food have run out," explains Parke Wilde, an assistant professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University in Boston. So as soon as you're out of the baked chicken you prepared last week, you replace it with fried chicken takeout. >

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SLIM-DOWN STRATEGY: Shop at the supermarket more than once or twice a month. “If people relied on grocery stores rather than fast-food restaurants or convenience stores for quick fixes, they would be better off,” says Wilde.

BIG FAT PROBLEM: Your job tempts you with bad snacks.

5 “In some offices, there is always food in the break room or at the receptionist’s counter,” explains Carmen Samuel-Hodge, a research assistant professor in the department of nutrition at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health. Think about the raspberry scone you had from that breakfast platter (440 calories), that yummy birthday cupcake you couldn’t resist (about 300 calories) or the one cosmo at happy hour (150–200 calories). But who really has just one? Considering that women between 19 and 50 years old should only consume between 1,800 and 2,400 calories per day, you’re on the road to weight gain.

SLIM-DOWN STRATEGY: Snack healthy by looking for low-cal alternatives. Switching from a cosmo to white wine, for example, could save you about 100 calories.

BIG FAT PROBLEM: You bail on breakfast.

6 People who don’t eat breakfast consume more calories during the day than those who do. Why? Because those initial morning hunger pangs signal to your body that there’s an inadequate food supply—and it goes into starvation mode. “As a result, when you finally eat, you tend to overdo it, and everything you eat automatically gets stored as fat,” says Stacy Ann Mitchell, M.D., coauthor of *Livin’ Large: African American Sisters Confront Obesity* (Hilton Publishing).

SLIM-DOWN STRATEGY: Eating a nutritious breakfast kick-starts your metabolism. Grab something quick like a banana or yogurt. Need something weightier? A piece of cheese toast or a whole wheat waffle with peanut butter can hold you over until lunch.

BIG FAT PROBLEM: You’re stressed.

7 A bad day at the office or horrendous rush hour traffic is not a good reason to seek and conquer that carton of Ben & Jerry’s (though it feels that way). “Stress affects your cortisol levels, which is linked to different bodily functions, including appetite,” says Brewton. “Increased cortisol ups your appetite.”

SLIM-DOWN STRATEGY: Find other ways to deal with stress. “Keep your hands and mouth busy,” says Fernstrom. “Drink flavored water, chew sugarless gum, go for a walk, learn to knit, clean out a drawer.” If keeping busy doesn’t stop your hands from reaching for the fridge door, get out of the house and do something else that makes you feel good. Shopping, anyone?

BIG FAT PROBLEM: You’re just getting older.

8 As we age, our levels of testosterone decrease. “Testosterone helps your body create lean muscle mass out of the calories you take in. And muscle cells burn more calories than fat cells, increasing your metabolism,” says Brewton. So as your testosterone decreases, your metabolism does, too.

“Every decade we get older, our metabolism slows by 5 percent,” says Fernstrom. **SLIM-DOWN STRATEGY:** You can’t stop the clock, but you can eat less and exercise more. “You just need to cut out 100 calories a day and walk for 20 minutes a day. The body’s metabolism can be offset by greater physical activity,” says Fernstrom. Strength training builds muscle and can also help you burn more fat. □



“If you must snack, eat healthy by looking for low-cal alternatives.”