

Weight Loss Plateaus and Pitfalls

It's kind of like running into a wall—that feeling you get when, after a few months on a weight-loss program, you suddenly stop seeing results.

This is called hitting a plateau and it is not uncommon. In fact, unless you continually update your program to reflect the changes your body has already experienced, you can almost be guaranteed to plateau at some point along your journey toward reaching your goal weight.

Weight-loss Woes

The first thing you should do upon hitting a plateau is try to determine the cause. Could you be eating more calories than you think? Research shows that most people under-report the number of calories they eat—it's not that they're lying; they just don't know how to make an accurate assessment of how much they're eating. And even if you're eating fewer calories than before you lost the weight, you could be eating just enough to maintain your current weight at your current activity level.

Unfortunately, people's bodies adjust their metabolism to resist weight change. This means that you burn fewer calories when you start consuming fewer calories. So, while a diet of 1,800 calories per day helped you lose a certain amount of weight, if you've hit a plateau, it could be that 1,800 calories is the exact amount you need to stay at your current weight.

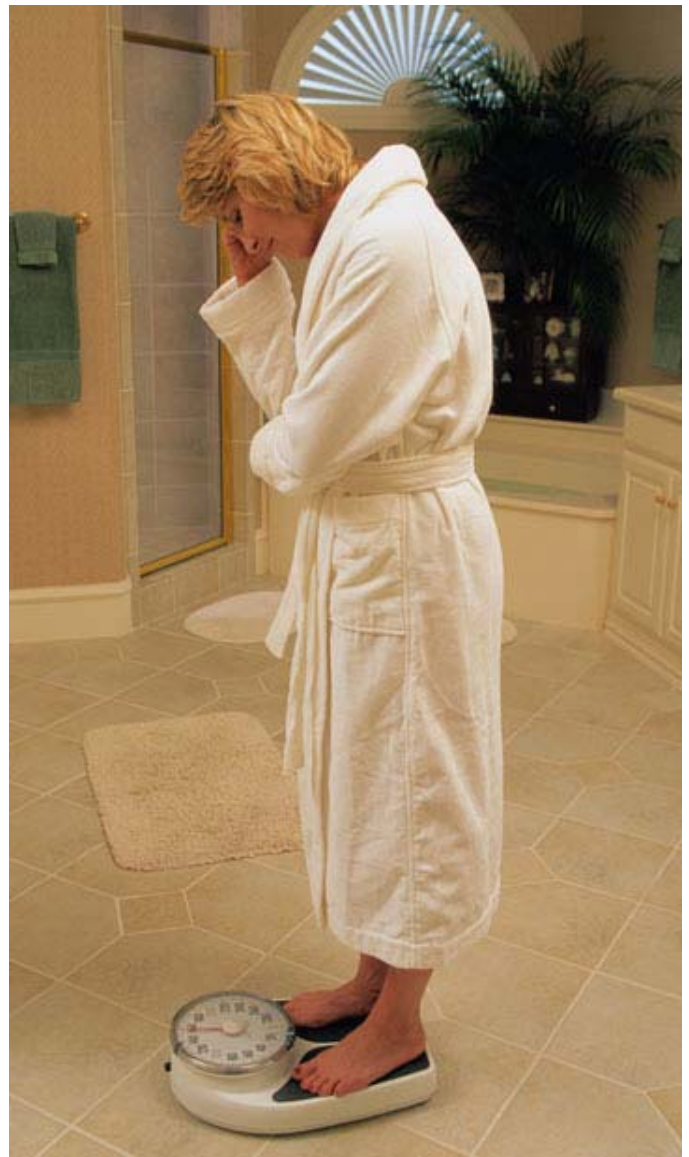
Exercise Your Options

This leaves you with two options: Lower your caloric intake further or increase the amount of time you spend being physically active.

The first option is less desirable because you may not be able to get sufficient nutrients from a diet that is very low in calories (e.g., below 1,200 kcal in women and 1,500 kcal in men) and it is difficult to stick with it for very long. It is much better to moderately reduce calories to a level that you can sustain when you reach your goal weight.

The same is true for exercise. Trying to exercise for several hours per day to burn more calories is a good way to set yourself up for failure. Not only does this type of regimen require an enormous time commitment, it is hard on the body, making you more susceptible to injury and overuse syndromes.

Instead, aim for 30 minutes of moderate activity most of the days of the week and, as you become more fit, gradually increase the intensity and duration of your exercise sessions. Choose activities that you find



enjoyable, whether that be in-line skating, step classes or even mall walking. The most effective exercise is the one you will do consistently.

Another means for getting you off the plateau is strength training, which has been shown to be very effective in helping people manage their weight because the added muscle helps to offset the metabolism-lowering effect of dieting and losing weight. Muscle is much more metabolically active than fat; therefore, the more muscle you can add, the higher your metabolism will be.

To help balance the intake with the expenditure, a good rule of thumb is to multiply your goal weight by 10 calories per pound, and add more calories according to how active you are. For example, if your goal weight is 145 pounds, then multiple it by 10 to reach 1,450 kcal as a baseline, adding calories as needed to account for increased activity. Check out the ACE Fit Fact titled "Calories Burners: Activities That Turn Up the Heat" to estimate the caloric demand of your workout. Again, be realistic. Don't attempt too much in an effort to burn more calories.

Get Off the Plateau

If you've stopped losing weight, the key to getting off the plateau is to vary your program. The human body is an amazing piece of machinery, capable of adapting to just about any circumstance or stimulus. By shaking things up a bit and varying your program by introducing some new elements, you'll likely find yourself off the plateau and back on the road to progress in no time.

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