

**One more way to stop counting calories?**

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# Quit Counting Calories Already!

That's right, we said it. Try these 7 easier ways to tip the scale in your favor.

By Holly Pevzner

**O**K, OK, we know calories are important. It's basic weight-loss math: You need to eat fewer calories than you burn if you want the pounds to come off. But when you get caught up counting them, you can miss the bigger picture. After all, we eat food not numbers, and our bodies don't treat all calories the same. "One hundred calories of broccoli, for instance, is filled with fiber that satisfies hunger, but 100 calories of soda will cause a blood sugar spike and crash and actually leave you craving more calories," says Carolyn Dunn, Ph.D., R.D.N., L.D.N., a nutrition specialist at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. (You'd also be noshing 2 cups of broccoli, compared to a puny 12-ounce soda.) Besides, most people are pretty bad at tallying calories—generally erring by about 110 over or under.

The good news? There are lots (and lots!) of other ways to cut calories that are way more intuitive and conducive to getting those extra pounds off than counting. Take a look, and make *this* the year you win at weight loss.

## 1. Focus on quality over quantity

Here's some calorie blasphemy for you: you can cut them without even *thinking* about them. Proof? A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that when dieters (both low-carbers and low-fatters) focused on getting quality eats—like vegetables and other whole foods—they inadvertently slashed 500 calories a day, in part by curbing added sugars and upping their intake of satiating fiber. "We never told anyone to count or restrict calories," says researcher Christopher D. Gardner, Ph.D., a professor at Stanford University School of Medicine. "But if you're eating foods that keep you fuller, longer, you're simply going to consume fewer of them. It's kind of impossible not to eat less."



## 2. Put down your phone

This is all about not being mentally out to lunch while you eat your lunch—or breakfast or dinner. Dunn conducted a study that instructed people looking to lose weight to continue eating the foods they loved—even high-cal treats—but only away from distractions, like their phones, the TV or while driving. She found that dieters who tuned in to their food lost almost 4 more pounds (on average) over 15 weeks than those who didn't. "We've all had the experience of eating while watching TV and then being dumbfounded when we discover the plate is empty," says Dunn. "When you eat while distracted, you miss out on both the enjoyment and the ability to notice when you've had enough."

### 3 Linger over your meal

• People who eat slowly are 42 percent less likely to become obese than those who speed-eat, according to a 2018 study in the *BMJ Open* journal. Similar to eating while distracted, “When you eat more quickly, you’re not allowing time for the gut hormones to signal the brain that you’re full,” says Dunn. Some tips to help you decelerate: put your fork down between bites; chew and swallow your food before digging in for more; and share a chatty meal with friends or family. Still having trouble slowing down? “At least wait 20 minutes from the start of your meal before considering seconds,” says Dunn.



**4. Count sheep, not calories** You probably know that skimping on sleep can make you hungrier—but 385 *calories* hungrier? That's the word from a report in the *European*

*Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, which compared the eating habits of sleep-deprived folks to those who got adequate shut-eye. And those extra calories were not in kale-salad form. The sleepy subjects ate more high-fat, low-protein foods. The reason: "Falling short on sleep increases levels of ghrelin, a hormone that ignites hunger, and decreases leptin, the satiety hormone," says Dunn. "If you're sleep deprived, your body will take that quick energy (remember, calories equal energy) from food." And studies show that just one night of inadequate rest can mess with your brain's hunger cues. For most adults, the sleep sweet-spot is 7 hours nightly.



## 5. See if you're hungry in the first place

Next time you're standing in front of the open fridge, pause and ask yourself: Am I actually hungry? Or am I reaching for something because I'm bored, or the food is just *there*? Eating only when you're honest-to-goodness hungry is linked to having lower body mass index, according to a report in the journal *Public Health Nutrition*.

## 6. Zero in on “I’m full” cues

Concentrating on calories can trick you into nibbling when you've actually had enough. "You might find yourself thinking things like, 'I'm allotted 200 calories for this snack, but I've only had 100, so I can have more,' even if your hunger has already been satisfied," says Dunn. "Essentially, you start to ignore what your body is telling you." The point is to eat because you need nourishment, not simply because you can.

**7. Track what you eat this way** Studies show food diaries are a super-effective weight-loss tool. But instead of using one to log calories, just try tracking your *hunger*, suggests Gardner. Write down what you eat and when. Later, look back at your day and how long it took for you to feel hungry between meals and snacks. “Say you had oatmeal at 6:00 a.m. If at 8:00 you’re already ravenous again, try a different breakfast the next day, like a veggie omelet topped with salsa, and see if that keeps you full until lunch,” he says. It’s all about cracking the satiety code and recognizing how satisfying or unsatisfying certain foods can be so you naturally eat less and wind up making better choices.

Another bonus of using this strategy: “Often, the thought of having to record junk can be enough to stop you from eating it,” says Dunn. And that’s a good thing, since noshing items like red and processed meats, potato chips, fries and sugar-sweetened beverages (all high-calorie foods, natch) is associated with the greatest long-term weight gain, according to a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

