

DITCH THE DIET

...and do this instead

If you are reading this, chances are you already know the pain of dieting.

Perhaps the word **DIET** conjures up images of hungry miserableness, fastidiously counting calories and repeated cycles of failure.

The trick to sustaining a healthy weight is to change your body's underlying biochemistry so that it gets the message that it is OK to let go of the fat it is choosing to store around the middle of your body.

While it's true that what you eat has a greater effect on weight loss than exercise, many of us are still unaware that the antiquated notion of 'dieting' is terrible for long term weight. In fact, research shows us that prolonged caloric restriction can lead to changes in the way your body stores fat and increase its efficiency at making body fat stores. Restricting calories or cutting out certain food groups can also lead to nutritional deficiencies which may exacerbate the problem. It can be tempting to go for a quick-fix diet, especially at this time of year with the weather finally warming up, but research shows again and again that fad diets are not only ineffective but can be downright dangerous.

So if you're struggling to shift that stubborn belly fat and feel fab in your bikini, it can be helpful to understand that the main reason some people gather more fat around their middle than others is specifically because of the action of the stress hormone cortisol. Millions of years ago, our bodies were designed to react

quickly to danger. Like wild animals, we were on constant alert so we could run or fight if threatened. When your brain thinks your life is in danger it stimulates the release of adrenaline and cortisol. This fight or flight response is incredibly clever and thoroughly efficient. It provides instant energy for 5-10 minutes allowing you to react swiftly to dangerous situations. These days, many of us live under chronic stress but our bodies can't distinguish between late trains, skipping lunch, missed appointments, spiralling debt, family disputes and the truly life-threatening stress it gears up to challenge. So it reacts exactly the same as it's always done. The problem with many modern lifestyles is that stress (our 'perceived threat') is almost continuous and comes without the natural release that either fighting or fleeing might provide. Unless you do something physical (as your body is expecting you to) all that extra energy, in the form of fat and glucose, has nowhere to go. It must be simply re-deposited as fat.

As well as psychological stress, many of us have habits that cause the body physical stress such as skipping meals, not drinking enough water or eating the same foods every day. If this is the case, there is a chance that your pattern of eating is subconsciously telling your body that it is under stress. If you restrict your diet or cut calories your body inevitably thinks there is a famine out there



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and that causes stress. It will slow down your metabolism to hold on to your precious fat stores. Furthermore, if your blood sugar levels fluctuate (as they do for most women), your body will be releasing adrenaline which is the same hormone it releases when you are under stress. Once more it encourages your body to store fat. The solution is to find a way of eating that tells your body all is well – and reassure it that it's not under stress. Try to stick to these simple rules:

1 Stop dieting (yes, really!) and don't count calories, otherwise your body will think there's a famine and raises stress levels (which contribute to fat storage). If you miss breakfast completely your body immediately registers famine and hangs on tight to your ample stores of fat.



2 Eat little and often

Try to keep your blood sugar levels and energy levels stable by eating something every three hours. This will stop those roller-coaster highs and cravings for sweet foods. Because your blood sugar isn't allowed to drop, your body will no longer have to ask you for a quick fix.

3 Don't skip breakfast

If you miss breakfast completely your body immediately registers famine and hangs on tight to your ample stores of fat.

4 Eliminate all sugar and refined carbohydrates

Avoid any foods that make your blood sugar rise quickly because as blood sugar drops again, your body releases adrenaline and cortisol to stabilise it once more. Swap to whole grain alternatives.

5 Add protein to each meal-

Protein slows down the rate the stomach processes food and slows the passage of the carbohydrates with it. As soon as you add a protein, (be it animal or vegetable) to a carbohydrate, you change it into a slower releasing carbohydrate, which is a very good thing.

6 Eat essential fats

A lifelong dependency on low fat diets might mean you're consuming less saturated fat but most people today have unwittingly made themselves deficient in the good fats – essential fatty acids. As the name implies, these essential fatty acids (EFAs) are essential and you can only get them from your diet. Your body cannot manufacture them so you have to eat them.

7 Don't eat on the run

It gives your body the message that time is scarce, you are under pressure and stressed. Furthermore, your digestive system will be less efficient. Make a point of sitting down and eating your food as calmly as possible.

8 Watch what you drink

Cut out all caffeine and sugary drinks and significantly reduce alcohol intake (cut it out completely for a month if you can).

9 Change the way you think about food

If you're really serious about changing your body shape, you need to think about food and eating as a way of life so that healthy and enjoyable eating becomes a habit, something you do everyday without even thinking about it, just like cleaning your teeth.