

# GET IT RIGHT

Win the weight-loss war  
by avoiding all 10 of these pitfalls.

BY ESTELLE LOW PHOTOGRAPHY BY WONG WEI LIANG

**D**espite having salad for lunch every day, junking your favourite sodas and chips, and making time to exercise, the number on the weighing scale still isn't budging. And it has been... four painful weeks!

Sounds familiar? Chances are, you could be doing something wrong. Seeing that your diet accounts for 70 per cent of weight loss and exercise 30 per cent (this much is true), we asked sports medicine doctors, dietitians and fitness trainers to pick out seven diet boo-boos and three workout blunders that women often make.

Whether you're guilty of just one or all of them, rectifying those errors will go far in pushing that magic number down – and keeping it that way.

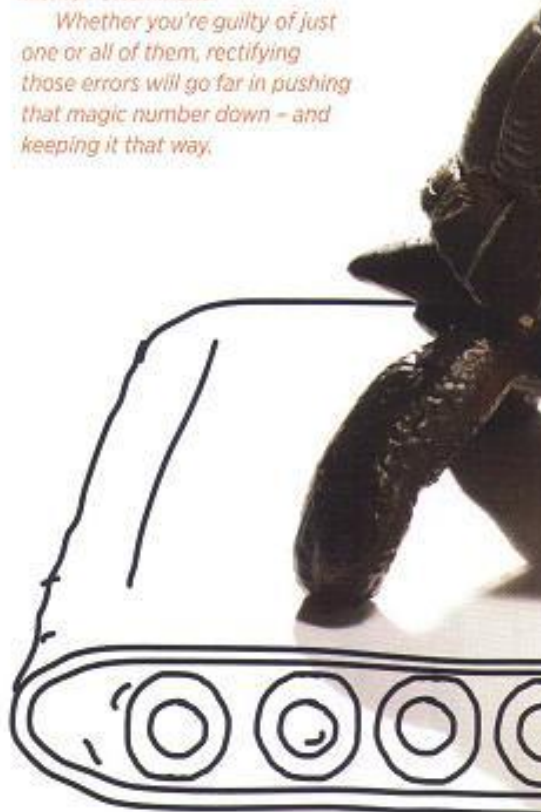
## MISTAKE

# 1

### EXPECTING QUICK MIRACLES

**FACT** Some people give up when they see no difference in weight after trying for a few weeks. For the overweight or obese (with a body mass index or BMI of 23 and above), it takes at least two months before they see significant weight loss resulting from lifestyle changes, says Ray McGregor, director of Gym N Tonic in Singapore. "That's because they need the time to lay a fitness foundation, before taking on higher-intensity sessions that translate to more weight-loss benefits."

**LESSON LEARNT** Give it time and start slow. Your first workout should be comfortable, so that you have motivation to keep it up. If you've been sedentary, brisk-walk for 20 minutes thrice a week and build up gradually, advises Dr Tey Beng Hea, senior consultant and director of Alexandra Hospital's weight management programme. By the third month, you should be burning double or triple the number of calories.





## MISTAKE

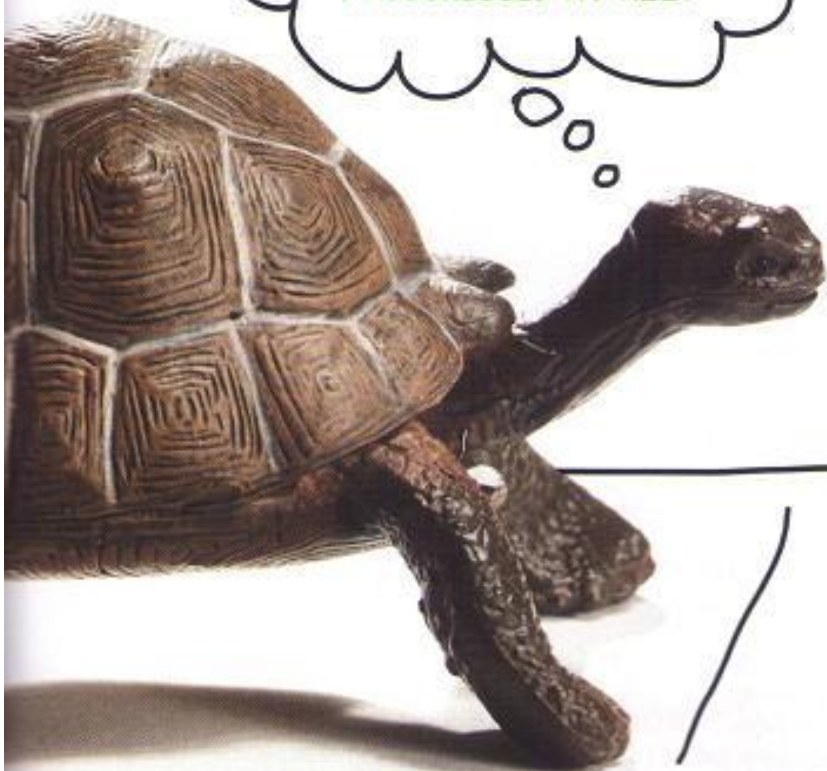
# 2

### SAME OLD, SAME OLD

**FACT** We know it can be frustrating when you've been working out steadily – and then you hit a weight-loss plateau. Many women fall into the trap of stagnating or hardly progressing from where they started, says Ray. "As a fitness newbie, you're likely to be working out at a low intensity and expending few calories. To boost the burn, you have to dial up the intensity – which you should be able to achieve after several weeks of training." When you get stronger, try short bursts of vigorous activity, like interval training. It burns more calories and up to 36 per cent more fat than constant, moderately intensive workouts, according to a study published in the *Journal of Applied Physiology*.

**LESSON LEARNT** If you can still talk while jogging on the treadmill, the workout is too easy for you, says Pauline Won, training and development manager at Amore Fitness. Up your distance, speed or dumbbell weight at every session, no matter how little. Think of the number of calories you'll eventually burn in week six compared to week one. And make sure you're actually spending enough time working out: You'll need to clock up 200 to 300 minutes of aerobic exercise per week to melt the flab, says Dr Darren Leong, resident physician at Changi Sports Medicine Centre.

I'VE BEEN AT IT FOR WEEKS  
NOW. WHY HAVEN'T  
I PROGRESSED AT ALL?



## MISTAKE

# 3

### DOING ONLY CARDIO

**FACT** Numerous studies have shown strength training to be more effective than cardio in blasting fat and building muscles. It's true that cardio workouts tend to torch most calories, but they actually burn both fat and muscles (which help you burn fat). "Having more lean muscle tissue greatly increases the body's potential to burn more calories," says Hadi Omar, personal trainer at Pure Fitness. "Don't worry about bulking up – it would take massive weights (think 50kg and above) and a bodybuilder's diet for that to happen," says Ray. Besides, the more muscles you have, the more calories you'll burn even when at rest. Plus, you'll improve your bone density and lower the risk of osteoporosis, adds Wendy Cho, master trainer at True Fitness.

**LESSON LEARNT** You need strength training too. Add exercises like squats, push-ups and lunges (which use your own body weight as resistance) to your routine, says Hadi. If you're working with free weights, start out with 1kg or 2kg dumbbells. With the ideal weight, you should be able to do 10 to 15 reps in good form and feel tired afterwards, says Ray. Then, bump it up as you get stronger.



### MISTAKE

# 4

#### SKIPPING MEALS

**FACT** While the crux of weight loss is about expending more calories than you consume, skipping meals will affect your metabolism (the rate at which your body burns calories), wreak havoc on your appetite and make you crave food with more calories at the next meal, says Jaclyn Reuters, a clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants.

**LESSON LEARNT** Have meals at fixed times as much as possible to keep your metabolism rate steady and stave off hunger. For breakfast, aim to get at least 300 calories from something substantial like a sandwich or cereal. Can't get your hands on something healthy? Even having a pastry is better than not eating at all, says Jaclyn.

#### FOLLOWING FAD DIETS

**FACT** Atkins, Dukan, Paleo, South Beach, Cabbage Soup... No harm trying them if they promise results, right? Wrong. Such diets tend to emphasise eating certain food groups while omitting or slashing your intake of others. That may help you lose a few kilos in a matter of days, but the effects are short-term and may result in nutritional deficits in the long run, putting you at risk of diseases, says Lim Ruey Jiun, senior dietitian at Alexandra Hospital.

**LESSON LEARNT** You're better off controlling your portion sizes while eating regular and balanced meals. Use your plate as a guide: Half should be filled with fibre, a quarter with carbs and the remaining quarter with protein, says Jaclyn. Women, especially, tend to overlook the need for certain food groups, like protein, which is essential for muscle recovery (optimising calorie burn) and carbohydrates (see Mistake 6), adds Angena Teo, senior dietitian at Changi General Hospital.

### MISTAKE

# 5



### MISTAKE

# 6

#### NO CARBS

**FACT** This macronutrient is actually responsible for fuelling brain function and physical activity, giving you the motivation and strength to work out. Plus, cutting out carbs and re-introducing them later on may lead to weight gain and a fluctuating blood sugar level, a precursor of diabetes, says Vanessa McNamara, founder of The Travelling Dietitian, a Singapore-based nutrition consultancy.

**LESSON LEARNT** Yes, you can have your potatoes, rice, bread, noodles and pasta – in moderation.

Include about five servings of rice and alternatives in your daily diet, and choose whole grains where possible, says Angena. Before digging in, take note: One serving is equivalent to half a bowl of rice, two slices of bread or four plain crackers. While at it, opt for carbs that are low on the glycaemic index – such as sweet potato, brown rice, pasta, wholegrain cereal and wholemeal bread – which take more time to be digested so you stay satiated for longer, says Vanessa. Spread out your servings evenly throughout the day to keep your blood sugar level in check.

### MISTAKE

# 7

#### OVERDOSING ON FRUITS AND MUESLI BARS

**FACT** Just because they're rich in fibre, antioxidants and other good stuff, it doesn't mean they're low in calories. Fruits like oranges, grapes and mangoes are very high in sugar, warns Jaclyn. Ultimately, the numbers still add up!

**LESSON LEARNT** Keep tabs on how much you're eating. Limit yourself to no more than four servings of fruits a day. One serving is equal to a small apple, a wedge of papaya or a medium banana. If you're having lunch at noon and dinner at 6pm, then you probably don't need to have a muesli bar in between, says Jaclyn.





## PLANNING TO CHEAT

**FACT** You'd think keeping a strict diet from Monday to Friday entitles you to slack off on the weekend. But for successful and sustained weight loss, your goal should be to condition your body to eat healthily at all times, and not just on certain days of the week, says Jaclyn. "Slip-ups happen, so don't deliberately schedule for them." Besides, you can do quite a lot of damage in just one cheat day: Down a plate of nasi goreng, an egg prata, a curry puff, a slice of cheesecake, a chocolate eclair, durian pudding and a latte at a buffet and that's easily 2,000 calories in one sitting!

**LESSON LEARNT** It's okay to give in to cravings when they strike — just not regularly. Take a few bites of that irresistible cheesecake right after a meal and share the rest with someone else instead of waiting till mid-afternoon when you're hungrier and likelier to polish off the whole slice, suggests Jaclyn. That way, you won't feel so deprived that you have to binge on the weekend.

MISTAKE

8

MISTAKE

9

## LETTING GO

**FACT** Are you thinking that since the damage is done, you might as well feast on? Just because you let loose at your company's D&D doesn't mean all is lost. By giving up, you're jeopardising your previous efforts, says Irene Cheng, a nutritionist at Herbalife Singapore.

**LESSON LEARNT** If you've overeaten, your best strategy is to downsize the next meal. Instead of focusing on your mistake, think about how far you've come. To prevent a similar slip-up at your next social event, start with fibre-rich fruits and veggies that are low in calories to keep your appetite in check, says Irene. Slow down chewing and stop eating when you're about 70 per cent full, she adds. Research shows that your brain needs about 20 minutes to process satiety signals.

I'VE BEEN GOOD FROM MONDAY  
TO FRIDAY. I CAN EAT MORE  
ON THE WEEKEND, RIGHT?

## THE C WORD YOU SHOULDN'T IGNORE

Losing weight is a game of maths, where you want to create a calorie deficit. Every day, burn 500 more calories than you consume and in a week, you would have logged a deficit of 3,500 calories. Keep it up for a month and you'd lose about 2kg. Sounds straightforward, but in reality, it's not so easy to get the numbers right. People tend to overestimate their calorie burn and underestimate their food intake. So before treating yourself to a pre- or post-workout snack, think about whether you've really earned it. A 60kg woman running at a pace of 9kmh burns about 330 calories in half an hour. Just one serving of chendol (386kcal), tau suan (413kcal) or pork floss bun (389kcal) will undo your effort!

MISTAKE

10

## PLAYING FAVOURITES

**FACT** Swapping lunch for a pack of fries or dinner for your favourite dessert might seem like you've made your calories worthwhile. But replacing meals with deep-fried or rich, sweet treats means you'll lose out on protein, fibre as well as essential vitamins and minerals that your body needs to function well, while overloading your system with fat and sugar. Over time, you risk nutrient deficiencies and losing muscles that rev up metabolism.

**LESSON LEARNT** Avoid filling your tummy with empty calories. In the long run, this strategy will make it tougher for you to switch to a healthier lifestyle. The next time you crave an indulgence, find someone to share it with and limit yourself to a small portion, says Irene. ■