

# ARE YOU EATING RIGHT?

Three *Shape* readers face up to some ugly truths and get a diet makeover.

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Unless you have zero cravings, excellent self-control and total insight into how your food is prepared, your diet could probably do with some improvement. To help you eat better with real-life examples, we invited three readers to consult with Jaclyn Reutens, a *Shape* advisory panellist and clinical dietitian with Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants. They were tasked with keeping an honest food diary for at least two weekdays and one weekend. This meant recording all that they consumed in detail, including when and where they ate and drank, how the food was prepared, serving sizes and exactly how they felt at those times. Jaclyn analysed the diaries and revealed that each reader made several diet mistakes (some unknowingly), which many women – ourselves included – are guilty of.







# “Cheat days are OKAY right?”

**Tan Wen Lin**, 27, market researcher  
Height 1.63m Weight 55kg



## HER PROBLEM

“I try to eat healthily on weekdays by having home cooked dinners with steamed dishes and soup. When I snack in the office, I’d have a cheese single or a handful of blueberries, almonds or cranberries. I also drink lots of water and green tea to replenish the fluids lost from my weekday hot yoga sessions. My weakness? I can’t resist temptations. When a colleague offers a yummy dessert, I usually cave in. I also can’t help indulging during weekends.”

## HER DIET MISTAKES

### ▲Mindless eating

Although Wen Lin tries to balance her snacks and meals, she’s uncertain about portion sizes. Her snack choices are generally healthy, but she risks eating more calories than intended – and could gain weight.

### ▲Cheating on weekend

From biscuits and cupcakes to carrot cake and dim sum, Wen Lin’s weekend food choices are high in fat, sugar and sodium. If she doesn’t limit these choices, she can easily undo her healthy eating over the week. In fact, in just one Saturday or Sunday, her calorie intake doubles that of a typical weekday!

## JACLYN’S ADVICE

### ▲Snack less

Every day (weekends included), Wen Lin should stick to three meals at fixed intervals, and get used to feeling hungry only at meal times. Having a serving of fruit right after lunch and dinner might help her fight the desire to munch a few hours later. On days when she exercises, she can have a small mid-afternoon snack like low-fat yogurt or a cereal bar if she needs the energy.

### ▲Moderate intake – don’t deprive herself

Feelings of deprivation can lead to letting loose or overindulgence. Wen Lin should not wait until the weekend to enjoy her favourite food. Instead, she should allow herself one treat during the week and one at the weekend. This should reduce her urge to accept offerings from colleagues and treat weekends as cheat days.

## WEN LIN’S COMMITMENT

I didn’t expect to do so much damage just by allowing myself to eat whatever I want at weekends! Having three square meals every day makes sense as I tend to lose control over my snack portions. I’ll work harder at refusing anything unhealthy from colleagues or friends too.

## What about buffets?

If your friends enjoy a once-in-a-blue-moon gathering over a buffet, you don’t have to opt out if you follow Jaclyn’s rules.

### DURING A BUFFET...

▲**One round only** To satisfy your need for variety, take a bit (half a ladle or three bites) of everything from the spread. Don’t go back for seconds. Alternatively, zoom in on up to eight of your favourite dishes and limit your servings to two tablespoons per item. Aim to include all food groups (vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy and meat) for a balanced meal.

▲**Take your time** If you’re dining with food pushers, employ this trick: Chew slowly to savour each bite and make sure to leave some food on your plate when you’re done.

▲**Save the sugar** At a celebration, have the cake and skip other desserts. Otherwise, have a serving that’s the size of two matchboxes of the one sweet treat that has caught your eye.

### THE DAY AFTER...

▲**Control your appetite** You might feel hungrier than usual as your stomach has expanded from the previous day’s eating, but stick to your usual portions.

▲**Take something soupy** The water content will make you feel fuller.

▲**Delay weighing yourself** Don’t see a difference on the weighing scale? That’s because any gain takes about two days to show.



# “I should **STOP** yo-yo dieting...”

**Natasha Hogan**, 40, executive  
Height 1.63m Weight 89kg



## HER PROBLEM

“I find it hard to maintain my weight. Even though I work out three to four times a week, I’ve been piling on kilos every year. I dare not eat too much protein because of my high uric acid level. But with my limited choices, I find myself indulging in sweet or deep-fried food to feel satisfied. Then I’d feel guilty and diet – only to regain the weight and put on even more when I stop.”

## HER DIET MISTAKES

### ▲Eating too often

On average, Natasha eats six times a day: breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, mid-afternoon snack, dinner and nighttime snack. Even after factoring in her regular exercise routine, she is consuming way more than her body needs.

### ▲Too much trans fat

Natasha eats excessive amounts of processed foods. Her diary included deep-fried snacks like prawn crackers and spring rolls as well as fat-laden stuff like roti prata, double cheeseburgers and fries. These are not just high in fat, but also contain the worst kind: Trans fats – solid fats derived from hydrogenating vegetable oil – which have been found to raise harmful LDL cholesterol levels and lower good HDL cholesterol. Too much increases the risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

### ▲Too much sugar

Although she tries to make better choices, like swapping teh (tea with condensed milk) for teh c siew dai (tea with evaporated milk and less sugar) and regular sodas for diet varieties, she still consumes too much refined sugar – especially since her daily diet includes at least one other sweet treat, like cakes or chocolates. These high-glycaemic index foods cause blood sugar levels to spike and crash quickly, paving the way for more intense cravings.

## JACLYN’S ADVICE

### ▲Have three balanced meals a day

While some nutrition experts recommend eating five to six small meals a day to keep blood sugar levels steady, most people – like Natasha and Wen Lin – have trouble estimating portions and end up overeating. By eating thrice a day and skipping snacks,

## What’s hyperuricemia?

The body has excessive levels of uric acid when too much of the chemical is produced or when the kidneys are unable to remove it quickly enough.

Uric acid is created during the breakdown of purine, a substance found in foods like meat, organ parts (such as liver and kidney), certain fish and seafood (anchovies, sardines, mackerel and scallops).

**Causes** “This condition is common among overweight or obese people and those with a family history similar to Natasha’s,” says Jaclyn. “Other factors, such as poor kidney function, diuretic medications and immune-suppressing drugs may contribute too. In Natasha’s case, reducing consumption of purine-rich food will help to lower her uric acid level.”

**Control it** Besides cutting down on purine-rich food, one should also reduce intake of sugar and booze. A recent study in *Diabetes* journal found links between hyperuricemia and a diet that’s high in added sugars, like table sugar and high-fructose corn syrup. What’s more, researchers from the National University of Singapore found daily drinkers of alcohol to be at a fivefold risk of developing the condition.

Natasha can lose at least 10kg in four months. Reducing her food intake would also help to lower the body’s uric acid level. In her case, the increased levels are linked to genes and eating way too much purine-rich foods like meat (see above).

### ▲Improve quality of meals

Some changes she can make: At breakfast, have two slices of wholemeal bread with low-fat cheese or wholegrain cereal with low-fat milk instead of convenient foods like cakes and instant roti prata. That way, she can still enjoy her morning tea. For lunch,





have economy rice with two servings of veggies and one of meat. As hawkers tend to pile on the rice, Natasha should ask for less or limit her intake to three quarters of the amount. If she's at a fast food outlet, order a regular burger (no doubles or quarter-pounders) without fries, and drink either plain water or a diet cola. To curb the urge to snack, sip on water or plain, unsweetened tea.

▲**Think before eating**

Her eating in-between meals is due to psychological hunger, not physiological.

Over the years, she has developed the habit of eating every few hours, whether or not she's hungry. The portions may not be big, but her unhealthy choices have few nutrients. All they do is add unnecessary calories.

▲**Tame that sweet tooth**

She needs to cut out sweet desserts because the cyclical nature of the sugar rush and crash would only make her yearn for more sweets once she gets started. To reduce cravings after lunch and dinner, she should have a serving of

any fruit except bananas and avocados which are very dense in calories.

**NATASHA'S COMMITMENT**

I'm quite excited. I think these diet changes are achievable – and I want to prove to myself that I can do it. If I succeed, I will share my experience with friends who want to lose weight the healthy, practical way too.



## What You Eat





# “I AVOID anything that makes me bloat.”

**Sharelle Low**, 29, executive manager  
Height 1.59m Weight 46kg



## HER PROBLEM

"My tummy bloats uncomfortably whenever I take dairy products, whole grains as well as high-fibre fruits and veggies, so I avoid them. Am I running low on some nutrients by cutting out these foods?"

## HER DIET MISTAKES

### ▲Calcium deficiency

This is quite common among lactose-intolerant people in Singapore, and Sharelle is one of them. Although she makes an effort

to include calcium in her diet by taking soya-based products and cheese, she's still not getting enough. Also, these foods can actually cause bloating.

### ▲Lacking other good stuff

She's very controlled and disciplined about her portion sizes, which helps in maintaining her weight. But her quality of nutrition needs improvement and balance. She seems to be getting enough carbohydrates and protein, but not enough fibre, vitamins A and C, as well as essential minerals like zinc and

potassium because of her restricted intake of fruits and vegetables.

## JACLYN'S ADVICE

### ▲Pick the right produce

Feeling bloated from consuming fruits and veggies doesn't mean Sharelle shouldn't eat them altogether. She should avoid gas-producing ones like bananas, asparagus, cruciferous vegetables (such as broccoli and cauliflower), beans and legumes. Nutritious alternatives that won't upset her tummy include carrots, tomatoes and gourds.

How the vegetables are prepared is also important. Raw produce contains sugars that are hard to digest, so instead of salads, she can eat more cooked leafy vegetables that her stomach can tolerate better. By adding a three-quarter cup serving each of fruits and veggies to her lunch and dinner, she will be boosting her intake of fibre, vitamins and minerals.

### ▲Take calcium supplements

Given her small frame and inadequate calcium intake over the years, she's at high risk of osteoporosis and needs 1,000mg of calcium a day. I recommend that she take a supplement to add another 500mg to 600mg of the mineral to her diet.

### ▲Include whole grains

Adding a small amount of unrefined, high-fibre grains to her daily diet – such as a small bowl of wholegrain cereal or two slices of wholemeal bread – will actually improve her digestion without causing bloating. Plus, these low-glycaemic index foods help to keep blood sugar levels steady and sweet cravings at bay.

## SHARELLE'S COMMITMENT

I was surprised to learn that soya bean products can actually make me gassy, so I might have been blaming the wrong culprits. Now I know what produce I can eat. Also, I've made a note not to avoid whole grains altogether. Calcium supplements and wholegrain cereal are on my shopping list!

## Eating what you need?

NUTRIENT	AIM FOR	EQUIVALENT TO
Protein	58g	255g steamed chicken or 750ml milk + 180g silken tofu + 2 eggs
Fibre	20g-25g	2 slices wholemeal bread + 2 medium servings guava + 2 cups French beans/broccoli/cabbage/carrots/chye sim
Calcium	1,000mg	3 cups low-fat milk or 1 cup yogurt + 4½ cups spinach
Iron	19mg	164g chicken liver or 380g wholegrain cereal

Daily recommended intake based on a female adult (1.6m, weighing 55kg).



# What you should

# EAT

To give you an idea of what a balanced, well-portioned meal should consist of, we worked with Jaclyn to produce this sample plan that's based on the needs of a female adult (1.6m tall, weighing 55kg) with no known health conditions. It adds up to about 1,600kcal.

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY
<b>BREAKFAST</b> + Coffee or tea (the way you like it!)	Medium bowl porridge/ayam soto	1 tuna bun	1 red bean pau
<b>LUNCH</b> + 1 serving of fruit	1 baguette (six inches) with chicken/meat filling and side salad	Rice with 2 servings vegetables and 1 meat/poultry/ fish/seafood*	Palm-sized portion of meat/poultry/fish/ seafood with medium- sized baked potato (minus sour cream/ butter) and side salad
<b>MID-AFTERNOON SNACK (only if you're exercising that day)</b>	1 serving fruit /low-fat yogurt	1 small cereal bar (less than 150kcal)	3 wholemeal crackers
<b>DINNER</b> + One serving of fruit	Spaghetti Bolognese with side of veggies	Meat/poultry/fish/ seafood soup with palm-sized bun and side salad	Rice with 2 servings veggies and 1 meat/ poultry/fish/seafood

## HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

- ▲ **CARBS** Eat half to three-quarters of the rice or noodles served, or request for less.
- ▲ **SUGAR** Limit soft drinks and desserts to just twice a week.
- ▲ **RED MEAT** Eat lean cuts of red meat no more than four times a week.
- ▲ **SEAFOOD** If your uric acid and cholesterol levels are normal, seafood such as prawns, crabs and other shellfish can be consumed every other day in reasonable amounts – about 90g (palm-sized portion without shell) at each meal.

\*Vegetarians may replace a serving of meat with ½ cup (150g) of tofu or beans like lentils or chickpeas



## OPT FOR...

▲ **STEAMED DISHES** as deep fried items are high in fat.

▲ **WHOLE GRAINS** like brown rice, which is lower on the glycaemic index and makes you feel full for a longer time instead of refined grains like white rice.

▲ **COLOURFUL VEGGIES** that are both leafy and non-leafy for a greater variety of phytochemicals.

### THURSDAY

2 slices wholemeal bread  
with cheese single or  
two poached eggs

Meat/poultry/fish/  
seafood soup with  
palm-sized bun  
and side salad

1 small slice  
banana cake

Bee hoon with palm-  
sized portion of meat/  
poultry/fish/seafood and  
1 serving veggies

### FRIDAY

Small bowl high-fibre  
cereal with low-fat milk

Medium bowl sliced fish  
and bee hoon soup

1 sardine puff

Palm-sized portion  
of meat/poultry/fish/  
seafood with medium-  
sized baked potato  
(minus sour cream/  
butter) and side salad



Jaclyn Reutens is a clinical dietitian, and founder of Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants ([www.aptima-nsc.com](http://www.aptima-nsc.com)). Having 11 years of experience in the field of nutrition and dietetics, she is a nutrition expert in the areas of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart diseases, cancer care and sports nutrition.