

Failure-Proof Fitness

By Richard J. Wolff, RD, LDN

Busy schedules and uncooperative weather can leave you inactive and overfed during the winter. Less exercise and more eating usually isn't a problem. It's when these behaviors become everyday occurrences that problems arise. Unfortunately, America is becoming a country that overeats and under-exercises but never does anything about it.

Contrary to popular opinion, staying fit does not require super-human discipline. In fact fitness is more about good decisions and setting your self up for success. Here are five real-life strategies guaranteed to help you make better decisions.

Work the Numbers

For most Americans winter is a time for giving up. Why bother with eating right and exercising when everyone around you is doing just the opposite? As a nation we have lost perspective when it comes to our health habits. We approach sensible eating with an all-or-nothing mentality. We make bad decisions without realizing how easy it would be to make good decisions. One way to regain perspective and get back on track is to *Work the Numbers*. Working the numbers allows you to see what's really happening.

That five-pound weight gain that seems all too common is easy to prevent when you work the numbers. Those additional five pounds are only an extra 125 calories per day when you average them out (November thru February). Cutting those calories is as easy as eliminating an ounce of cookies, cake, pastry, chips, mayonnaise, butter, margarine, peanut butter, chocolate, nuts, gravy, salad dressing or cheese from your daily diet. By working the numbers it's clear that good decisions are within reach.

Take Your Medicine

Imagine a medicine that made you feel better, kept you lean and strengthened every cell in your body. That medicine already exists. According to the *American Medical Association* (AMA) and the *American College of Sports Medicine* (ACSM), physical activity is that medicine. The AMA and ACSM have joined forces to spearhead a bold initiative called *Exercise is Medicine*. This initiative calls for physicians and health professionals to assess every patient's physical activity at every visit. The goal of this initiative is to treat physical activity as a "vital sign" so that patients receive the support and encouragement needed to stay active.

Given the circumstances, winter may be the best time of year to embrace *Exercise is Medicine*. Exercise helps to manage all the challenges we face in the winter. It improves

mood by altering brain chemistry, it burns calories by increasing metabolism and it improves eating habits by functioning as a gateway behavior. The research is clear. People who are physically active manage stress better, are less likely to gain weight and, yes, they eat better. Even more encouraging is the fact that small doses of physical activity (such as a brisk, 10-minute walk) get the job done.

The same is true when it comes to muscular strength and endurance. According to the latest exercise guidelines from the *American College of Sports Medicine*, one full-body strength workout per week (less than 30 minutes) can maintain muscular fitness as long as the training load (weight lifted) remains constant.

Think “Easy Wins”

Surveys show that most Americans avoid changing their diet because they dread the idea of giving up their favorite foods. The good news is you don't have to. A better way to improve your diet is to look for easy wins. Easy wins are doable changes you can live with. For nearly three decades now I've managed my diet with easy wins. Here are three of my favorites;

Fruit Smoothies: I use fruit smoothies as a low-calorie, high-nutrition option almost daily. The fact that they are easy to make makes them very appealing. Here's one of my favorite recipes: one scoop of chocolate meal replacement mix (I use HMR 120), 6 to 8 ounces of water and 1 cup of frozen unsweetened strawberries.

Mix for 1 to 2 minutes in a blender on low. In no time you have a great-tasting smoothie that keeps you full for hours.

Low-Fat Protein: When it comes to protein, I stick with low-fat options to maximize nutrition. My easy wins include: fish (not fried), poultry, low-fat yogurt, veggie burgers, and meal-replacement powders. I save at least 500 calories a day by choosing low-fat protein sources over high-fat protein sources.

Low-Calorie Weekdays: Here's where good decisions come to life. My weekdays are typically more structured than my weekends. I take advantage of this structure by planning low-calorie days during the week. These low-calorie days end up balancing off my unstructured, high-calorie weekends.

Create a Safe Haven

In his new book, *The End of Overeating*, Dr. David A. Kessler, former Commissioner of the FDA (Food and Drug Administration), attempts to tackle the complex issue of why Americans overeat. Despite the complexity, there's one truth that stands out. We eat what's in our environment.

It should come as no surprise to learn that people who purchase nutritious foods (and keep them around) have healthier diets than people who do not. You can tell a lot about a person's health by looking at their pantry. Despite the notion that psychology is a major influence of eating habits, there's no data linking it to changes in eating over the past century. However, numerous studies have linked changes in the environment to changes in eating habits. If you want to improve your diet, change your environment and your diet will improve automatically.

Eat More

For years now, Americans have been trying unsuccessfully to eat less. Ironic as it may seem, eating less is not the right thing to do. Eating less only leaves you hungry and malnourished. The best way to improve your diet is to eat more.

By recommending that Americans eat more, health professionals are finally applying what behavioral scientists have known for years. Telling someone what not to eat doesn't work. The best way to improve your diet is to focus on what to eat. Everyone knows that eating cup cakes for breakfast is a bad idea. Reminding them that cup cakes lack nutrition doesn't help them change that behavior. However, helping them increase their intake of healthy foods does change that behavior.

When you add healthy foods to your diet (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, yogurt, fish, etc.), you automatically crowd out the less-healthy foods. The 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* has embraced this approach by encouraging Americans to get the most nutrition out of their calories. Focusing on nutrition first is the foundation of an *Eat More* approach. When everything is said and done, eating more is an easy and effective way to improve your diet.

Your Next Step

Now it's your turn. Steal one or more of my failure-proof strategies and make this your best winter ever!