Simple Strategies for Fighting Fat

Yes, our culture celebrates curves, and if the cook ain't fryin' it, we're not tryin' it. But being overweight puts us at risk. Here are easy, practical, affordable steps to a healthier you.

July 1, 2005 By Hilary Beard , Dawn Baskerville and Marjorie Whigham-Desir

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The good news is that African Americans don't hold themselves to the same stick-thin standards of beauty as whites. "I've always had guys trying to holla—I still do," says Sharon Payne (not her real name), a 28-year-old Brooklynite who is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 247 pounds. But, she says, "I feel unhealthy and unattractive." According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 77 percent of black women and 62 percent of black men are overweight—which helps explain why we lead in many statistics for obesity-related conditions, like diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Recent research suggests that being slightly overweight isn't as much of a health threat as had been thought. But Clyde Yancy, a cardiologist at the University of Texas in Dallas, says that a person who is obese—weighing more than 20 percent above normal—is three times more likely than a person at a healthy weight to die prematurely. Here are some ideas for getting yourself on the road to better health.

1. Know what you should weigh

The CDC came up with an index of healthy weight called the Body Mass Index (BMI). (To find out yours, see "What's Your BMI?") People with BMIs between 18.5 and 24.9 are considered to be in a healthy range; over 30 is obese. The BMI is not perfect: "African Americans have more muscle mass and greater bone density than whites," says Bill Dietz, M.D., Ph.D., a nutrition and exercise expert at the CDC. In addition, the BMI is calculated using a nationally representative (meaning mostly white) population sample. But at BMIs of 30 and above, he says, excess weight is pretty much due to fat.

2 Know how much you should be eating

If you're a moderately active man, multiply your weight in pounds by 15 calories (make that 12 if you're a woman). But if you're pretty inactive, multiply your weight by 10 if you're female, 13 if you're male. A 155-pound woman who is moderately active needs to eat 1,860 calories per day (155 times 12). Calories are units of energy—if you eat more than you need, they get stored as fat. To avoid that, eat less—or exercise more.

3 See a health professional

Before you embark on any weight-loss or exercise program, see your doctor or go to a health clinic and get a medical pro's OK. While you're there, get your blood sugar and pressure checked to see

if you're at risk for diabetes or hypertension. (Hell, why not do your body good and get tested for HIV, vaccinated for hepatitis and screened for cancer, asthma and other conditions?)

4 Strive for feeling good

Forget what you see on magazine covers. "The average American woman is 144 pounds and a size 12 to 14," says Teresa Kay-Aba Kennedy, a nutritionist and president of Harlem, N.Y.–based Power Living Enterprises. "Body types are so different that health should be the focus." For instance, can you go through the everyday motions of life—laundry, groceries, climbing the stairs to your apartment or playing with your kids—without getting winded? Are your blood pressure and blood sugar in a healthy range?

5 Get family and friends on your side

University of Pennsylvania's SHARE study is examining the effect of social support on weight-loss success among blacks. They're onto a powerful thesis: As our success stories attest, family and friends can definitely challenge attempts to live healthier. "Folks who are jealous or just as overweight like to see me fall or encourage the behavior by buying fatty food and then offering it to me," Payne says. Explain to your partner, pals and kids that you want to be healthier and live longer. If they're open to eating healthier with you, you have a head start. But if you only have the time to prepare or buy one batch of food for your family, read on.

6 Stop supersizing

According to a 2002 study by New York University, serving sizes of prepared foods (and people's expectations of what makes a "serving") have ballooned over the decades. At a typical restaurant or fast-food joint, you will probably be served at least twice (in the case of pasta, up to five times!) what you need for good nutrition. A three- to four-ounce serving of meat should fit into the palm of your hand; a serving of pasta or vegetables (one cup) is about the size of a tennis ball. To find out more about healthy serving sizes, visit www.mealsmatter.org.

7 Compliment the chef

When you're at somebody's house, to avoid throwing food away and insulting the chef, start out with smaller servings, eat slowly and really taste and enjoy your food. Instead of going back for seconds, accept leftovers and freeze them to eat another day. (If you're out at a restaurant, eat half the food and take the rest home—you'll save money and time on your next meal!).

8 Find new rewards

Often, "food is a coping mechanism for stress," says Dr. Shiriki Kumanyika, Ph.D., M.P.H., of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. So find nonfood activities that make you feel good: Watch a funny television show (without the bag of chips!), call a friend, take a hot bath, walk around the block with your favorite tunes in your earphones, ask your loved one for a massage (or more!). If you're trying to stay healthy, these moments of "you time" aren't luxuries—they're necessities. And if you're mad at your boss, boyfriend or kids, a workout with a punching bag or a tae-bo DVD will do you a lot more good than a bag of chips.

9 Drink more water

Celebrities who've lost weight and kept it off—such as Mary J. Blige and Faith Evans—swear by water (see "Faith and Strength," page 20). Water flushes impurities and "definitely helps with weight loss," says Rojean Williams of Hebni Nutrition consultants. Take half your weight—that's the number of ounces you should drink a day (a 175-pound guy needs about five half-liter bottles). If you're not down with plain water, try a citron pressé—water with fresh lemon sliced and squeezed into it (no sugar!).

10 Watch the white stuff

We're talking about flour, sugar, rice, pasta—these foods pack a whole lotta calories, don't have much nutrition, and, while temporarily filling, will leave you feeling hungry soon. Instead, try eating the USDA's recommended two cups of vegetables and two cups of fruit per day.

11 Limit fast food to twice a week

Yes, it tastes good. Yes, it's cheap. And in many low-income, urban neighborhoods, it's probably easier to get than fresh produce. But according to a 15-year study released in January, folks who eat fast food twice a week or more double their risk for diabetes and carry 10 or more extra pounds of body weight. If you do hit the fast-food joints, try different items on the menu—chains like McDonald's are offering a greater array of salads. Just make sure yours isn't swimming in dressing, which packs fat and calories. And try ordering the regular size and see if you're still hungry afterward.

12 Ditch the liquid sugar

Coke and Mountain Dew fans, we know you're not trying to hear this. But drinking one less can of regular soda per day will save you 55,000 calories (or 15 pounds) a year. But you might want to think before you reach for that fruit juice or diet soda. A tall glass of OJ can pack 180 calories, and diet soda can actually make you more dehydrated, which can leave you wanting to drink—or eat!—more. Fresh fruit will deliver more fiber and leave you feeling fuller than fruit juice. And as for quenching thirst, there's nothing like water.

13 Get the fried effect

It's no surprise why folks like fried food—the technique can keep meats like chicken and fish moist while the fat in the oil adds flavor. Instead of coating meats in flour or crumbs and frying, try marinating meat in your favorite sauce (or, like Patti LaBelle does with her oven-fried chicken, setting the meat in mildly salted water for three hours). Then discard excess marinade or water, brown meat in a pan with nonfat cooking spray to give a crispy outer layer, then bake to cook through. To keep your meats moist, use a meat thermometer in the oven, and don't overcook! Experiment with low-fat or reduced-sugar barbecue sauce, nonsalt seasonings like Mrs. Dash and bring the hot sauce!: Chili peppers are low in calories, pack vitamins C and A and speed up digestion and metabolism.

14 Drop mad science in the kitchen

While we're on the subject of what you do in the kitchen, experiment with what you do it with: Watch the oil, butter and sugar, and try substituting low- or nonfat milk and cheeses (just for fun, see if your family can taste the difference). Instead of doing the same-old, same-old in the kitchen,

check out healthier cookbooks with soul-food tastes in mind, like Patti LaBelle's Lite Cuisine and The New Soul Food Cookbook for People With Diabetes (on the Internet, you can also search tons of flavorful, chef-tested recipes at www.cookinglight.com). Keep the recipes you like in a folder to make grocery shopping easier. (and peep our healthier barbeque recipes in "More Better Barbecue," page 36)

15 Make exercise a party

You're much more likely to do it if you consider it fun (and it feels good) rather than if exercise feels like a chore. Walk with your favorite jams in your ear, ride a bike, walk the dog, roller skate, go line-dancing, take a kung fu class, join a pickup basketball, handball or soccer game. You can also keep it close to home with an exercise DVD (see "Get Fit at Home," page 16) or make it a group thing: Ask a friend to go with you to the gym, grab your peeps for a power walk around the track or check your church for group fitness or gospel-aerobics classes (see "Sweat Inspiration," page 16 for info on how to find or start one).

16 Go steppin'!

Walking is great exercise, but how do you know if you're getting enough? Buy a pedometer, which measures the number of steps you take per day (available for as little as $9.95; visit www.pedometer.com or check your local sporting goods store). Try to walk at least 10,000 steps a day. If your daily motions aren't cutting it, try getting off the bus a little farther from work and walking the rest of the way, parking the car a little farther away at the mall or taking the stairs instead of the escalator or elevator.

LOSING TO WIN: Andrea Baptiste

On NBC's hit reality show The Biggest Loser, Baptiste, 31, dropped 39 pounds—and lost 26 more once the show ended. Here's how:

Try a little selfishness. Baptiste's new diet and exercise routines had an impact on family life. "It was overwhelming, and I felt like I was sacrificing time with them," she says. "But I knew they would be there for me. My gym time is my time." Once there, she says, "be focused and efficient. Make sure it's effective. I see women in full makeup who don't even break a sweat."

Make the investment. Eating healthy can be time-consuming and more expensive "than grabbing something on the go, but you don't want to just grab what's convenient." Baptiste goes to discount outlets like Costco and buys food in bulk, then breaks it down into portions for storage and easy preparation. She also suggests "carrying healthy snacks with you, so you don't need to go to McDonald's, because the fries will suck you in!"

Healthy doesn't have to mean bland. "I'm not someone who can get by on egg whites and turkey bacon," she says. So for breakfast, she chooses yogurt or healthy smoothies with fresh fruit. "I allow myself a cheat day sometimes, like on my girls' night out. I refuse to punish myself. Once you say no, you want it all the more."

Keep it moving. Baptiste runs five days a week for about 45 minutes each time and weight-trains for 30 minutes several times a week. Even with her busy, travel-filled schedule, she says she can stick to it. “Even if you’re not able to use a good gym, there are exercise tapes,” she says. “You can walk. It’s about committing to yourself and loving yourself enough.”—Dennis Brabham

What’s Your BMI?
To find out if you’re in a healthy weight range, use this formula from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

Step one: Multiply your height (in total inches) by your height (in total inches). For a woman who is 5 feet 4 inches tall, 64 inches times 64 inches equals 4096.

Step two: Divide your weight (in pounds) by that number. So if our sample woman weighs 175 pounds, that’s 175 pounds divided by 4096, which equals .04.

Step three: Multiply this last number by 703. So .04 times 703 equals 28.12.

Step four: If your number is below 18.5, you’re below what’s considered a healthy weight range for your height. If your number is between 18.5 and 24.9, you’re in the sweet spot. Over 25 is considered overweight, and over 30 is obese, with higher risk of developing conditions associated with obesity. With a BMI of 28.12, our sample lady is getting up there.

Dropped It, Now He’s Hot: Jeffrey Jacobs
Despite holding down a job as a university administrator and pursuing a master’s degree, Jacobs (above) has kept up the habits that helped him lose 110 pounds in one year. His hypertension is under control, the joint soreness of his plus-size years has mostly disappeared and he no longer shops at big-and-tall men’s shops. Here’s his story:

Health is not a luxury. “I work out, because if I don’t, I gain weight. It’s now a part of my day.” He loosely follows the Body for Life system by Bill Phillips, which calls for weight-training the upper body one day, the lower body the next, then cardio and repeating the cycle.

Consume conscientiously. “I eat a lot of fast food and in restaurants—it’s easier to go to McDonald’s or KFC than to spend seven dollars on a salad—but you can still eat healthy if you know to look for lean meats and vegetables and avoid sugars and carbs.”

Health is a family affair. “I was taught to eat everything on my plate,” Jacobs says. “Culturally, my Caribbean family didn’t understand dieting, so it came with its share of problems. My mother would put a plate in front of me and say ‘eat.’ I might have to explain that I didn’t want to work out on a full stomach. She’d feel if I didn’t eat, there was something wrong.” Jacobs has gotten his folks to understand—somewhat. “Now they don’t try to serve me two plates or ask me to take food home.”

Your body will adjust. When Jacobs gets cravings, he does give in to an extent, knowing that he’ll

make up for it. But he’s noticed that since changing his habits, the cravings don’t come as often.—DB

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/Simple-Strategies-for-Fighting-Fat-1969-4747