

The Truth About Weight Loss

Some years ago, a friend proudly announced that she was resolved to lose weight. Each night after work she went to the gym, worked up a good sweat, burned off some calories, and confidently drove home believing that her actions would result in eventual weight loss. A few months later, she revealed to me that she stopped exercising. When I questioned her decision, she broke down in tears. Since she began her diet, her weight actually increased.

My friend truly believed that her exercise routine would result in weight loss. However, there was another, more important, part of her lifestyle that she purposefully ignored. On several occasions, I saw her after her workout, and I noticed that she carried a bag of fast food and a large shake for her dinner.

Exercise is a wonderful activity, with a myriad of health benefits. However, as the sole means of losing weight it is insufficient.

The number of books and articles devoted to weight loss that I witness when I shop is truly amazing. One would assume that any culture so dedicated to lose weight should consist of slender people. One would be mistaken – by more than a few cheeseburgers.

Think of it this way. If you gain just two pounds each year after you graduate from high school, you will weigh 50 pounds more by your 25th high school reunion. Weight sneakily accumulates over time, much like those gray hairs that you increasingly pluck out as you age. Before you know it, you desperately aspire to lose 50 pounds in a very short time. Good luck with that.

But back to my friend. She did not recognize that her caloric intake was more significant for weight loss than exercise. In addition, from her perspective, she worked extremely hard, was very dedicated, and still failed. Mentally, her commitment was for nothing, and her tears of frustration revealed the failure.

Of course, the easiest path to a desired weight is to avoid gaining all that weight in the first place. This is obviously harder for some people than others, including childbearing mothers and taste-testers working in the donut industry.

Set aside all the fad diets. Yes, it is true that some might have a marginal advantage over others. However, overall caloric intake is still the primary determining factor to your weight.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' website, www.health.gov, a 154-pound person burns off about 280 calories when they walk a moderate pace for one hour. Vigorous jogging or bicycling for one hour will burn off 590 calories. It is not clear why the data is based on 154 pounds and not 150 pounds. Perhaps it was done by the same person who made gasoline prices end in 9/10ths of a cent. Regardless, let's accept these numbers.

Go to any fast food restaurant website and examine the calories per item. Most of the larger sandwiches are over 500 calories, and, incredibly, some reach over 1,000. You would need to briskly jog, run, or bicycle for one hour – and possibly longer – just to burn off the caloric impact of one of the larger sandwiches.

The large fries and shake she purchased? Most milkshakes I researched were over 500 calories, while french fries range from 200 to over 500 calories.

Many nutritionists believe that a daily limit of 1,500 calories is necessary in order to lose weight. My friend probably consumed that amount in a single meal, while burning off – at most – perhaps 500 calories. Despite her devotion, determination, and perseverance, she was losing ground in the daily calorie battle. Months later, she was defeated.

The truth is that losing weight is overwhelmingly the result of lowering caloric intake. Yes, exercise can definitely help. Burning an additional 100 calories a day corresponds to 36,500 calories a year – which roughly amounts to ten pounds of weight loss. However, most people overestimate the amount of calories they burn in routine activities. That is the reason nutritionists emphasize both diet and exercise.

But weight loss comes down to a simple question: Which is easier, burning off a 1,500 calorie meal through hours of vigorous exercise, or replacing a high-calorie meal with a more nutritious lower-calorie meal? Unless you intend to spend most of your day at the gym or preparing for a marathon, for the average person the answer is obvious.

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