

You've Hit a Weight-Loss Plateau – and How to Break Through

In the first weeks or months of your weight-loss journey, the regular scale routine can feel intoxicating. Each time, the number reads a little lighter than before. Sure, weight loss isn't easy, but you are confident that you can hit your goals. Then, one day, the scale doesn't budge. A few weeks later, it still won't budge. Your reaction might be to think that you're doing something wrong. Don't succumb to negative self-talk, it's so important to expect to hit a plateau at some point. If you don't, it can be easy to get frustrated, give up on healthy lifestyle changes and regain all of the lost weight.

Why? Your body is a master adapter. Its end goal is homeostasis, or for everything to stay the same. But that doesn't mean you can't achieve your fitness goals.

Here are three possible reasons:

1. You've already lost some weight. Your body may need time to reset after the weight you've already lost, so stay patient after hitting a plateau. One of the main drivers of a plateau is that, after weight loss, your body's metabolism drops significantly. That's because your overall body mass is the primary determiner of your resting metabolic rate, or the number of calories you burn per day before factoring in exercise and activity. So, as your body mass drops, so does your metabolic rate, meaning you must keep cutting more calories to continue seeing results. However, the metabolic rate declines that accompany weight loss are often greater than what could be explained through body mass alone. For example, when a 2016 obesity study from the National Institutes of Health examined the metabolic rates of men and women who had previously lost weight on the TV show "The Biggest Loser," researchers found that former contestants, after losing weight, burned 499 fewer daily calories than they should have based on their weights. "It has been hypothesized that your body doesn't know the difference between intentional weight loss and famine, so it tries to help your body hold onto and even regain weight".

How to break through: For every 10 percent of your body weight you lose, you need to consume roughly 20 percent fewer calories to continue losing weight. And to keep any metabolic declines to a minimum, it's important to not only burn fat, but to also build muscle, a pound of muscle is more metabolically active (meaning it burns more calories) than a pound of fat.

- A 2015 review published in the journal "Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism" recommends increasing protein to account for 25 percent of your daily calories to minimize any muscle loss while dieting. If you're eating 2,000 calories per day, that works out to 125 grams of protein, with each gram containing four calories.

2. You're getting fitter. When you try an exercise for the first time, you may feel really uncoordinated or even shaky. But by your second set of that exercise, you may notice things clicking a bit more. That's your body learning how to perform that exercise, and figuring out which muscle fibers to recruit, which to let relax and how to coordinate it all. The same thing happens over the course of weeks (or months). Your body becomes more efficient, so it burns less energy doing any given workout. What's more, it's important to realize that it takes more energy (or calories) to carry a 200-pound body through any given workout than it does a 150-pound one. As your body becomes more efficient, you burn fewer calories during each workout, which could translate to a stuck scale.

How to break through: Focus on the concept of progressive overload, or incrementally increasing the demands on your body so that you're constantly challenged – no matter how fit you get use the simple solution of the FITT principle (Frequency, Intensity, Time and Type). Every three to four weeks, change up your exercise frequency, intensity, time or type of exercise.

3. Your body needs time to reset. The set point theory suggests that there is a weight range at which our body is comfortable, and any time we move away from that weight, our body works toward getting us back to the comfortable weight. Originally, the theory suggested that genetics fixed your set point, but now experts are exploring the possibility that your set point is more flexible, explains Stephen C. Woods, director of the Obesity Research Center at the University of Cincinnati. He notes that environmental factors, lifestyle and brain activity may all significantly influence the body's set point. "A plateau may simply be your body adapting to a new set point; your metabolism needs time to adjust."

How to break through: Stay patient after hitting a plateau before you try to increase your caloric deficit through cutting calories, exercising more or employing both tactics, White says, warning not to go under 1,200 calories without medical supervision. It can be hard to wait, but it's important to remember that even your weight loss leading up to the plateau can have significant health benefits. Be patient and, as long as you don't give up, you can achieve your weight-loss goals.

