

## 3 Unexpected Reasons for Weight Loss Plateaus

July 28, 2017



Few aspects of weight loss are as frustrating as when the changes you've seen on the scale begin to slow down, and then seemingly stop altogether. If this sounds familiar, you may be experiencing a weight loss plateau.

Some reasons for slowed weight loss are obvious, such as when healthier diet and exercise choices begin to give way to old, less healthful habits. But it can be hard to identify the reasons for a weight loss plateau when you stick to the healthy lifestyle changes that have already helped you lose weight.

Here are three reasons for running into an unexpected weight loss plateau, along with simple strategies to help get the scale moving again.

### **1. You're over your target for calories.**

It's clear that excess calories can slow your weight loss progress. However, it can be difficult to estimate how many calories you consume and expend in a day. Research suggests that most people, including trained healthcare professionals, tend to overestimate calories burned through exercise and underestimate calories consumed in food (1, 2). Even if you carefully keep track with a food journal or phone app, or wear an activity tracker, these methods can only provide a general estimate and are often much less accurate than you might expect (3).

A more practical approach is to look closely at your everyday habits and consider what potential impact they might have on your goals. For example, little "extras" such as sugar and cream in your morning coffee, or absent-minded snacking while you're cooking a meal can really add up over the course of a day. A closer look at these habits might be what you need to get the scale moving again.

## **2. You've become too fit for your workout.**

If your weight loss progress has stalled despite your consistent effort at the gym, it might be time to look at your exercise routine. As you become increasingly fit from the hard work you're putting in, it's essential that you adjust your workout routine so that it continues to challenge you.

This idea is captured by what fitness experts call the "overload principle" of training. Essentially, the principle is that when an exercise is below a minimum level of intensity, it doesn't challenge the body enough to result in any change (4). The level of intensity you need to get results from your workout depends on your current level of fitness. As your level of fitness improves, you need to change your workout in order to keep seeing results. It can be as simple as continuing to increase the amount of weight you lift, or trying a new type of workout.

## **3. You've been skimping on sleep.**

Many of us fail to get the recommended seven to eight hours of sleep each night. Unfortunately, research suggests that inadequate sleep could be interfering with weight loss success. Large, population-based studies consistently find a link between poor sleep quality and higher body weights (5). Some of the effects of poor sleep, such as changes in hormone balance, appetite regulation, and metabolism may explain the relationship between too little sleep and weight gain (6-8).

If your goal is weight loss, make sleep a priority. Start with simple changes in your routine such as avoiding caffeine late in the day, sticking to a consistent schedule, and limiting late-night screen time to help your body wind down at the end of the day. Adding a quality melatonin supplement to your evening routine is another step that can help prime your body for a restful, complete night's sleep.

Making a few small changes might be all you need to get past a plateau. Identifying the cause of a weight loss plateau is key. While weight loss plateaus can be a frustrating part of the weight loss journey, they shouldn't discourage you from reaching your goals.

## **References**

1. Brown RE, Canning KL, Fung M, Jiandani D, Riddell MC, Macpherson AK, Kuk JL. Calorie Estimation in Adults Differing in Body Weight Class and Weight Loss Status. *Med Sci Sports Exerc.* 2016 Mar; 48(3):521-6. doi:10.1249/MSS.0000000000000796.
2. Cottrell E, Chambers R. Healthcare professionals' knowledge of calories. *Nurs Stand.* 2013 Jan 23-29;27(21):35-41.
3. Chen J, Cade JE, Allman-Farinelli M. The Most Popular Smartphone Apps for Weight Loss: A Quality Assessment. *JMIR Mhealth Uhealth.* 2015 Dec 16;3(4):e104. doi: 10.2196/mhealth.4334.
4. Garber CE, Blissmer B, Deschenes MR, Franklin BA, Lamonte MJ, Lee IM, Nieman DC, Swain DP; American College of Sports Medicine. American College of Sports Medicine position stand. Quantity and quality of exercise for developing and maintaining cardiorespiratory, musculoskeletal,

and neuromotor fitness in apparently healthy adults: guidance for prescribing exercise. *Med Sci Sports Exerc.* 2011 Jul;43(7):1334-59. doi: 10.1249/MSS.0b013e318213fefb.

5. Jean-Louis G, Williams NJ, Sarpong D, Pandey A, Youngstedt S, Zizi F, Ogedegbe G. Associations between inadequate sleep and obesity in the US adult population: analysis of the national health interview survey (1977-2009). *BMC Public Health.* 2014 Mar 29;14:290. doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-14-290.
6. Spiegel K, Leproult R & Van Cauter E. Impact of sleep debt on metabolic and endocrine function. *Lancet.* 1999 Oct 23; 354(9188):1435-9.
7. Spiegel K, Tasali E & Penev P et al. Brief communication: sleep curtailment in healthy young men is associated with decreased leptin levels, elevated ghrelin levels, and increased hunger and appetite. *Ann Intern Med.* 2004 Dec 7; 141(11):846-50.
8. Miller MA & Cappuccio FP. Inflammation, sleep, obesity and cardiovascular disease. *Curr Vasc Pharmacol.* 2007 Apr; 5(2):93-102.