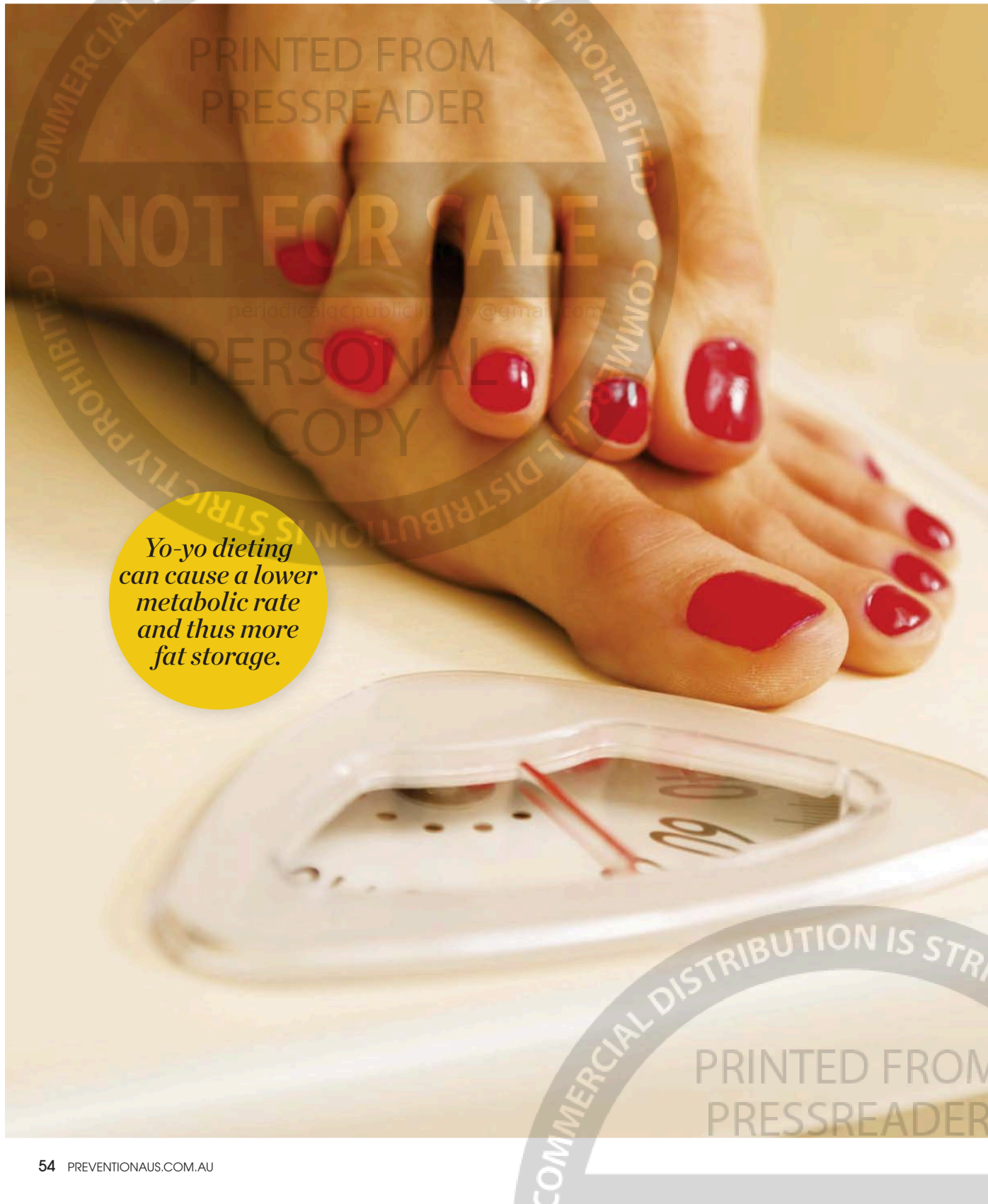


- Diet



Yo-yo dieting can cause a lower metabolic rate and thus more fat storage.

KEEPING WEIGHT OFF

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NOT FOR SALE

You've lost weight.
So how do you
KEEP IT OFF?

Two-thirds of people regain weight after losing it,
so what should we do to prevent a relapse?

BY LOUISE ATKINSON

Like many 'women of a certain age', my obsession with dieting started in childhood. At 12, I was having an F-Plan-style (high-fibre, lean protein, complex carb diet) high-fibre breakfast and taking cottage cheese on Ryvita to school in my lunchbox.

By my 20s, I had memorised the kilojoule counts of hundreds of foods, and it may be no surprise that my career in journalism has focused on health with a specialised interest in nutrition and diets. I've tried them all – in the interests of research, obviously – and I've probably lost and regained those same stubborn five or six kilos of belly fat numerous times.

Each time I launched myself into some exciting low-kilojoule, high-fibre, low-fat, ►

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high-protein or low-carb regimen, I'd gather my huge reserves of willpower and grab on to a fresh unassailable conviction that this time I'd get slim and *stay* slim. But the rolls of fat always returned. Losing weight (without the aid of weight-loss injections) isn't easy, but you get carried along by optimism, conviction and the tumbling numbers on the scales. Then, when you return to real life, with muffins on sale with every takeaway coffee and a husband begging you to join him in his evening wine habit, it's really hard not to slip back into your old ways.

A big analysis of 29 long-term weight-loss studies showed that dieting is pretty futile: more than half of the lost weight returns within two years, rising to 80 per cent by five years. I've interviewed a few people over the years who have lost weight and successfully kept it off and one secret keeps cropping up: the ongoing application of meticulous daily control.

Leading longevity expert Professor Norman Lazarus has famously maintained what he calls his 'correct weight' for more than 35 years by rigid discipline. "That means every day I have to dedicate myself again to not eating for the sake of eating..." he says. "You can never let your guard down. Every day is a battle and every day you have to say no to the things you'd love."

So, is the only sure-fire route to maintaining your ideal weight long-term to live on lettuce forever? Or can science reveal the best tips and tricks to ensuring the next diet you try really is your last?

MAINTAINING MAINTENANCE

It fascinates me that many of the diet plans I've investigated over the years put so much emphasis on the exciting weight loss phase, then pat you on your now-smaller bottom and send you on your way with very little advice about how to stay at your new-found target weight. It's a similar story for weight loss injections. Dieters who have successfully shed kilos thanks to injectables can find themselves in a futile battle against cravings and roaring hunger when they stop. In fact, a US trial carried out in 2023 found that participants gained back two-thirds of the weight they had lost. Doctors say that, anecdotally, they've seen this kind of rebound in patients, too.



KEEPING WEIGHT OFF

So, what's to be done? Dr Claire Madigan, a senior lecturer of exercise and health sciences, is conducting research into the kind of post-diet weight maintenance support that big diet plans offer, and the degree to which this helps protect against all the lost weight piling back on again.

According to Dr Madigan, a 2013 US study shows that teaching people 'stability skills' before they set about trying to lose weight can boost their chances of long-term success afterwards and help put an end to yo-yo dieting. She also points out that a diet plan that teaches you the principles of healthy eating and provides post-diet support is likely to better equip you with the knowledge and awareness you might need to protect you from slipping back into the habits that caused you to gain weight in the first place.

Maintaining weight loss also means a reduced risk of chronic diseases.

THE POWER OF EXERCISE

Although regular exercise is great for almost every aspect of your health, studies consistently show that it isn't a golden ticket to weight loss (unless you're marathon training). However, it does appear to form a magic part of the weight-maintenance formula.

A weight control registry in the US followed more than 10,000 people who enjoyed sustained weight loss and found that 90 per cent of them exercised, on average, for an hour a day. Sixty minutes is quite a lot, but it

seems any amount of physical activity helps – as long as you do it regularly.

"Consistency is more important than intensity," says Dr Madigan. Research suggests you should try to get at least 250 minutes of exercise each week to maintain weight loss. A study published last year by Dr Madigan and her team found that those more likely to stick to exercise were those who "found it enjoyable, prioritised it and integrated it into their daily routine". So, keep at it!

Get used to smaller portions

"When you're going into a diet regimen, you need to be thinking about what you're going to do when you're coming out," Dr Madigan points out, "and that means you'll have to accept that you can never eat like you used to."

For one thing, the maths just won't work – and that's where a lot of people fall down. They reach the end of the diet, breathe a big sigh of relief and order the large pizza ▶



KEEPING WEIGHT OFF

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they'd been dreaming about during their months of deprivation. But if you've successfully lost 20 per cent of your bodyweight, the portion of spaghetti Bolognese you serve yourself will have to shrink by at least 20 per cent to keep in line with your body's new fuel requirements. And if you were steadily gaining weight beforehand, your old pasta bowl was probably too large and you'll need to get used to eating even less, perhaps two-thirds the size of your old portion (forever!), if you don't want to see the weight creeping back on.

According to the science, as you get slimmer, your energy expenditure decreases at a rate of approximately 33 kilojoules a day for every half kilo of weight lost. Nutrition experts from the US calculated that a weight loss of 15 kilos creates an energy gap of around 1340kJ a day. This means that to maintain that weight loss, you need to eat 1340kJ a day less than you did before you lost weight – indefinitely.

SET POINT THEORY

For years, obesity experts have argued that one major reason we tend to pile the weight back on so fast after losing it is because our body and brain register the diet period as 'famine'. The period of deprivation appears to trigger chemical processes that intensify hunger and accelerate the speed at which we store fat in a bid to protect us against possible future 'famines'.

"Crash dieting is a metabolic challenge for the body that raises alarm bells," explains nutritionist Dr Federica Amati. "If you've been depleting your body's store of nutrients and fat reserves, it'll work really hard afterwards by raising your appetite signalling and lowering your metabolic rate so you can return to the 'set point' state and weight it believes you need to be at to survive and thrive."

She says that this 'set point theory' is less likely to apply if you lose weight gradually (around one kilo per week), because it gives your body and brain time to adjust.

Another key to persuading your body to accept the new slimline you could lie in making sure you eat enough of the kind of fibre that keeps your gut microbiome happy. A diet rich in fibre and prebiotics, including fruit, vegies, wholegrains and legumes, can boost the growth of beneficial gut bacteria, which ferment the fibre and produce short-chain fatty acids that help to regulate appetite and support good gut health.

Shrink your portions and you'll shrink your waist.



REFOCUSING THE RESEARCH

With the rising popularity of weight loss injections and the unpalatable idea that users could experience insatiable hunger once they stop injecting, the focus for obesity researchers is fast switching from 'how to lose weight' to 'how to keep the weight off' – so watch this space. But until more studies appear, there are some useful strategies (below) that may help... and it seems the solutions are not as draconian as we might fear. Indeed, some are so simple that you won't even break a sweat!

Fast fact

Only 30 per cent of people who reach their goal weight are able to maintain their weight loss for 18 months.

SOURCE: NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

5 science-backed weight maintenance strategies that really work



1 Exercise

A large-scale 2022 review of 52 studies from the US, Portugal, Germany, Finland and Greece found increased physical activity to have the strongest link with successful weight loss maintenance.



2 Motivation

One 2023 study by researchers in the UK found that setting goals motivated by health or fitness was associated with greater weight loss and lower likelihood of dropout. For instance, the motivation to avoid diabetes or heart disease might provide a stronger motivation than "I want to fit into my size 12 jeans."



3 Eat real food

The 2022 international review of studies found the most frequently reported weight loss strategies included having healthy foods available at home, eating breakfast, increasing vegetable consumption, decreasing sugary and fatty foods, limiting certain foods and reducing fat in meals. Eating well also means avoiding highly processed foods as

much as possible – ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are associated with an increased risk of weight gain.



4 Weigh yourself regularly

Studies (including one led by Dr Madigan in 2015) show that jumping on the scales on a regular basis does help to keep weight in check. "If you closely monitor your weight, you can quickly identify slip-ups and make small changes to get back on track," she says.



5 Prioritise good sleep

Quality shut-eye is crucial for successful weight maintenance. A recent Danish study published in the journal *Sleep* found that short sleep duration or poor sleep quality was associated with weight regain after weight loss. That's likely to be because losing sleep causes levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, to rise, triggering a release of glucose into the blood, which drives cravings. And studies show that sleep-deprived people consume, on average, an extra 1600 kilojoules a day. So, rest up! 📺