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Writing Off Extra Calories

by Sally Squires

Paper weight.

A new study suggests that a piece of paper — and the willingness to use it — could be what stands between you and a more healthful weight.

That's one conclusion from a report released Tuesday that was led by a team of scientists at Kaiser Permanente's Center for Health Research in Portland, Ore. The group recruited 1,685 men and women, ages 25 and older, to participate. All were overweight or obese and had high blood pressure and elevated blood cholesterol — two familiar health complications of extra pounds.

"There is a common myth that most people have trouble losing weight and can't lose enough weight to make a difference," said Victor J. Stevens, senior investigator at Kaiser Permanente and a co-author of the study, which was supported by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and appears in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. "This study demonstrated that most people can."

About two-thirds of participants lost weight, shedding on average 12 pounds — far less than what most dieters dream, but enough weight to significantly reduce their blood pressure and elevated blood cholesterol levels.

What helped guarantee success was attendance at weekly group meetings on nutrition and behavior change, plus keeping a daily record on paper of food and physical activity.

"This is pretty simple," Stevens said. "It doesn't have to be high-tech." (Find a sample of the food and exercise forms used in the study at www.leanplateclub.com.) By tracking how much food they ate, participants were more likely to eat less — a key step to shedding pounds.

"A lot of people will say, 'I was thinking about eating something or other, but I didn't want it on my food record,'" Stevens said. "The next day, they are never sorry that they avoided that extra cookie or fast food."

That's what happened to Julie Satterwhite, 46, of Portland. As a finance manager at the Housing Authority of Portland, Satterwhite spends hours daily in a sedentary job. "I was a classic yo-yo dieter," she said. "I lost 10 pounds only to gain 20. I'd lose 20 and then gain 30."

Despite trying everything from the Atkins diet to Slim-Fast, Satterwhite said that until the study, she had never kept food or exercise records. "I took the instructions to do this very seriously, recording food seven days a week," she said.

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Her family, including four children ages 17 to 24 years, also encouraged her efforts. But it was the idea of having to record what she ate that really helped Satterwhite put the brakes on runaway eating. She lost 30 pounds during the first four months of the study, then shed 25 more pounds after that.

The low-tech approach worked well, but became tedious. Other participants shared that same sentiment. “Whenever they would talk about [keeping records] in the program,” Satterwhite said, “they would say, ‘I hate them, but they work.’”

After losing 55 pounds, Satterwhite stopped keeping track of what she ate. “That was ultimately a mistake,” she says. “I gained a little of the weight back.”

So she has returned to recording what she consumes, but has traded in paper and pencil for an online system — CalorieKing (www.calorieking.com) — that does the math for her. Satterwhite pays \$55 for a year’s membership, but there are sites with calorie counters that can be accessed at no charge (see list below).

The pounds are coming off, and Satterwhite has also found a compromise that she can live with. “I keep recording what I eat for at least several days a week,” she says, “to keep that awareness of what food I am eating and what not to eat.”

It’s this accountability that Stevens says makes a difference in the long term. “We are encouraging people to make relatively modest changes,” he says. “They need to start to eat in a way that they can maintain forever.”

Here’s a list of websites where you can record your food and physical activity online for free:

- FitDay (www.fitday.com)
- MyPyramid Tracker (www.mypyramidtracker.gov)
- Nutrition Data (www.nutritiondata.com)
- SparkPeople (www.sparkpeople.com)