

When we put a bottle of water on our desk or go to the gym early we might think we're being healthy, but are we? Viki Wilson reveals the unknowing ways we derail our good intentions

Photographs by Craig Fordham

8 ways we sabotage our weight loss

OVER OUR LIFETIME, many of us acquire habits in our attempts to stay healthy. We share desserts, keep water on our desks, get up early to go to the gym. But as psychologists delve deeper into the subliminal thinking that underlies our perennial battle to balance our diets and lead healthier lives, they're discovering many of these habits are actually undermining our efforts.

'It's not so much the behaviour itself that sabotages our attempts to lead a healthier lifestyle,' says [Dr Lisa Turner of Psychademy](http://www.psychademy.co.uk) (www.psychademy.co.uk), who trains therapists to help patients with weight loss issues. 'It's the unconscious thinking that underlies that behaviour.'

While these habits may seem trivial, consuming or expending 100 calories more or less each day has a huge impact – what Dr Brian Wansink, author of *Mindless Eating* (Bantam), calls the 'mindless margin'. So not leaving your desk all day, or eating some of your children's food while you prepare their meals, makes a big difference.

Here we reveal the most common ways we sabotage our own efforts to become healthier.

Putting water on your desk

'It's true we're often so out of touch with our bodies that we mistake hunger for thirst, and by making water freely available you avoid that,' says Dr Lisa Turner. But a bottle on the desk is a behaviour that acknowledges one very unhealthy fact – you're not planning to move for a good stretch of time. You're encouraging yourself to be more sedentary.'

Solve the sabotage: 'A litre of water on your desk is convenient, but any more and you're putting your physical needs below getting your work done,' says Dr Cath Stamper, a psychologist specialising in weight loss. Add another motivation to get up and move, says Turner. 'Keep the minimum stationery on your desk so you have to replenish supplies regularly.' ▷

SABOTAGE SOLUTION

Eat alone

'It's good to eat evening meals with the family, but do try to eat alone as well sometimes,' says Dr Lisa Turner. 'This helps you stay in touch with the kinds of food your body wants and needs and also gives you time and space to eat at your own pace.'



2 Feeding the kids first

This is a familiar scenario for many parents. But preparing food and breathing in the cooking smells makes you hungry, says Stamper. 'You end up either snacking on the children's leftovers or reaching for snacks to tide you over.'

It's instinctive in most animal behaviour that those who are fed last are at the bottom of the social hierarchy of their pack or group. So by feeding yourself last, you're putting yourself at the bottom of the list in your household.

Stop the sabotage: 'Have a few family meals together each week,' says Turner. 'When you can't, sit down while the kids have their tea and slice an apple and eat it with them. This way you're appeasing your appetite, and joining in with the ritual of eating as a family.'

3 Taking on extra work

As the recession bites, this can seem like a professional survival technique. But the reason we accept additional tasks when we really don't have the time is usually a sign of a more complex thought process. 'This is a reflection of conflicting values,' says Turner. 'We want to be successful at work, meet the needs of our partner and children and take care of ourselves, but we don't believe that it's possible to achieve all of those things. And so we strike the taking care of ourselves part off the list. The problem is that if you don't take care of your health, you can't take care of your family and you

can't do the work that's important to you.' Telling ourselves we don't have time to exercise, or to buy or prepare healthy food, may also be a symptom of low self-esteem, and a sign that you don't feel you deserve time to devote to looking after yourself.

Stop the sabotage: 'Use the same impulses that drive you to take on too much work to help you,' says Zoe Harcombe, author of *Stop Counting Calories And Start Losing Weight* (www.harcombediet.com). 'Plan appointments to exercise. Just as you wouldn't give yourself a choice about going to work on a rainy morning, don't give yourself a choice about skipping exercise.'

4 Avoiding tempting occasions

Avoiding social occasions when you might be faced with food, or banning sweet treats from the house can backfire. 'This behaviour makes things worse if your aim is to maintain a healthy weight long-term,' says Turner. 'You're creating a deprivation situation, and building up the unconscious belief that tempting foods are scarce and so you must eat as much as you can while you get the chance.' This undermines your confidence in your ability to resist temptation. 'You don't think you can do it, and by behaving in a way that

underlines that, you reinforce that message,' adds Harcombe. 'You knock yourself down so much that you think, "I may as well go the whole hog and have bread, a creamy pasta and dessert", but feel guilty immediately afterwards.'

Stop the sabotage: 'When eating out, decide that you will eat what you really enjoy, and avoid the things you're not bothered about, such as tasteless breadsticks,' says Harcombe. Adopt a maintenance mindset – the event won't help you lose weight, but it needn't make you gain weight either.

'Avoiding eating meals out can undermine our confidence'

5 Getting up early to go to the gym

The assumed wisdom that morning is the best time to exercise is unhelpful. Studies at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago show that confusing our circadian rhythms by not getting a regular eight hours' sleep results in weight gain, and the lack of sleep triggers hormones that boost hunger and appetite. 'If you're naturally more active later in the day, exercising early becomes something to get out of the way,' says Turner. 'Physical exertion can and should be pleasurable. Having it as something you have to do means you're drawing up battle lines within yourself.'

Stop the sabotage: Plan exercise for a time when you find it physically easier and more enjoyable, and plan the rest of your day around that. If you do prefer to exercise first thing, compensate for lost sleep by going to bed earlier. ▷

SABOTAGE SOLUTION

Write a weekly shopping list

'This simple habit makes a huge difference,' says Dr Cath Stamper. 'By making the list, you plan the meals you're going to eat and think about when and in what circumstances you will eat them. In turn, this makes you prioritise your health.'





SABOTAGE SOLUTION

Choose the right glasses

Studies show we eat more if plates are bigger, and the same goes for drink. 'There's research that short, wide glasses cause us to drink more than we otherwise would,' says Dr Cath Stamper. 'And the brain is less likely to register calorie intake from drink than food.'

6 *Serve yourself half portions*

We typically eat about the same volume of food every day, even at each meal. Research by Dr Barbara Rolls at the Pennsylvania Center For Health And Nutrition found that if we think we've eaten less than our usual daily volume we'll think we're hungry, and will eat more to compensate. But if we think we've eaten more than our usual volume of food, we'll feel full. Deliberately restricting our portion size on a regular basis results in us eating more as we snack to compensate.

Stop the sabotage: Have large portions of vegetables or lean protein, pulses and salads, alongside the rest of your meal, and you will feel satisfied for longer, and less tempted to snack later.

'Deliberately restricting portion size results in snacking more later'

8 *Mulling over your day's calorie intake*

Many of us get into the habit of keeping a daily calorie count; logic dictates that if we consume fewer calories than we need, we lose weight. So what's wrong with counting? 'Often we'll lie in bed at the end of the day and work out how "good" we've been or, if we've been "bad" and eaten a lot, we feel guilty,' says Harcombe. 'This constant rumination erodes our mental and emotional resources. Feeling guilty often means

7 *Cooking for your partner*

'Women who cook for their partner often choose foods based on their partner's wants and preferences rather than their own,' says Stamper. 'Even if you are trying to improve your diet, you will prepare and eat high-calorie foods if your partner prefers them.'

The danger is that you may lose touch with your own food preferences. Women who are married or co-habiting tend to gain more weight than their single peers, with one study from the University of North Carolina revealing that, on average, newly married women gain an extra 9lb over five years compared with single women.

Stop the sabotage: Become more aware of your role as the family's nutritional gatekeeper, says Dr Brian Wansink. 'It takes a confident woman to say to her partner, "From now on, we're eating food I like and that is good for me",' says Turner. 'But studies show that women lose weight and their families eat more healthily when this happens. If your partner wants something different, he can cook tomorrow.'

we end up eating more, in a paradoxical attempt to comfort ourselves.'

Stop the sabotage: Start thinking of a 'good' day as one when you have eaten lots of healthy, balanced foods. In other words, a good day is a day when you have really nourished your body. Do this and you'll subtly move from an attitude where you're punishing your body by starving it of the fuel it needs, to a mindset where your goal is nourishment. ■