Speeding Up Your Metabolism

How to burn more calories and control your weight as you get older

Have you ever wondered why you keep getting heavier even though you exercise and watch your diet? Perhaps you have a friend who eats dessert every night and never gains an ounce, whereas you seem to put on more weight every year.

The answer rests in your metabolism: your body's conversion of what you eat and drink into either energy or stored fat.

Unfortunately, your metabolism tends to slow down in your 30s—which makes avoiding weight gain in later years an uphill battle. The good news is that no matter what your age or how fit you are, you can take steps to speed up your metabolism.

Three ways you burn calories

Everyone needs a different number of calories to maintain his or her weight. Your body's caloric requirements depend on three factors, all of which can be altered: resting metabolic rate, physical activity and how you process food.

- **Resting metabolic rate.** You burn calories even when you're sleeping, reading or watching television because your body needs energy to carry out basic functions, such as breathing, pumping blood and repairing cells. The number of calories your body uses at rest—known as your resting metabolic rate—accounts for 65 to 75 percent of the calories you use each day.

  Several factors affect your body's resting metabolic rate. Men burn more calories than women, heavier people burn more calories than lighter ones—even though they remain heavier—and young adults burn more calories than older adults. In fact, your resting metabolic rate decreases by about 10 percent per decade after age 30. Some of this age-related decline is caused by the inevitable slowing of metabolic processes. But most of it can be attributed to the gradual replacement of muscle with fat, which burns fewer calories per pound.

- **Physical activity.** Your body in motion burns about 15 to 30 percent of your daily calories. Some physical activity is in the form of exercise: perhaps a bike ride or a session on the treadmill. But much of it comes from everyday activities such as gardening, cooking, walking and even fidgeting.

- **Processing of food.** The remaining 5 to 10 percent of your calories is burned while digesting, absorbing, transporting and storing what you consume. The energy required for this process is referred to as the thermic effect of food.

**Kick-starting your metabolism**

To speed up your metabolism, you'll want to boost all three ways your body burns calories. Here's how:

- **Add muscle.** Each pound of muscle burns about six calories a day, versus two calories a day for fat. If you're able to replace 5 pounds of fat with 5 pounds of muscle, you'll burn an extra 20 calories a day. Although this translates into a difference of just 2 pounds a year at 3,500 calories a pound, that's 20 pounds over a decade. Strength training exercises, such

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Although you may assume that **exercise** is the main variable in how many calories you burn, it's actually your resting metabolic rate that accounts for the majority of your daily energy requirement. Your resting metabolic rate slows as you get older and lose muscle mass. Fortunately, you can build muscle through activities such as strength training, yoga and Pilates. Muscle-building exercises should be done in addition to cardiovascular exercise, which you need to keep your heart and blood vessels healthy.

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as lifting weights or doing squats, lunges or sit-ups, can help you build muscle.

**Get moving.** Just 30 minutes of moderately intense exercise five days a week can burn about 1,000 calories a week. That works out to about 15 pounds a year. High-intensity workouts, such as jogging or using a stairclimber, may have an additional benefit—increasing your resting metabolic rate after a workout.

**Eat more often.** The American Dietetic Association recommends eating three meals and one or two snacks a day. "Studies suggest that eating smaller, more-frequent meals does increase your metabolism slightly," says Carmen Roberts, M.S., R.D., a dietitian at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center. Just make sure to choose healthy snacks, such as fruit or yogurt, and don’t increase your overall caloric intake.

**Eat breakfast.** Starting your day on a healthy foundation, such as a bowl of high-fiber cereal, makes it far less likely you’ll grab a fattening Danish later on. Another benefit to breakfast? Studies suggest that it gets your metabolism going. “When you haven’t eaten all night, your body is in a sluggish mode,” says Roberts.

**Consume enough protein.** Although your body needs a combination of carbohydrates, protein and fat each day, protein is especially important for people who want to lose weight. One reason, explains Roberts, is that your body uses up extra calories digesting protein because it’s the hardest food source to break down. Another reason is that getting enough protein ensures that any weight you lose comes primarily from fat and not from muscle. The recommended daily allowance (RDA) for protein is approximately 56 grams for the average adult male and 46 grams for the average adult female. Don’t overdo the protein, though. Eating too much protein can be hard on your kidneys and liver and may also weaken bone.

**Drink plenty of water.** Your body runs more effectively when you’re well hydrated—and that includes your metabolism. Water is your best calorie-free choice.

A small study has shown that the process of digesting two cups of water can speed up your metabolism by about 30 percent for the next half hour or so. Although 40 percent of the effect comes from the body’s warming the water from room temperature to body temperature, there’s no evidence that chugging ice water burns extra calories.

**Get your zzzs.** Running short on sleep boosts levels of the hormone ghrelin, which research says can make you hungrier, slow your metabolism and promote fat retention. In one study, dieters randomized to get 5½ hours of sleep a night lost only half as much weight as those who got 8½ hours of sleep a night.

**Don’t crash diet.** If you go on a very-low-calorie diet, your body will go into starvation mode—slowing your metabolism instead of speeding it up to make full use of every calorie consumed. That’s why most people shouldn’t trim more than 500 calories a day from their normal intake. The exception is people whose caloric intake is very high to begin with.

**Turn down the heat.** Earlier generations generally lived in chillier homes and used up extra calories trying to stay warm in the winter. Although there’s no need to be uncomfortable, lowering the thermostat by a couple degrees in the winter may accomplish two goals: reduce your heating bills and burn a few extra calories. Exercising outdoors in cooler temperatures instead of inside a climate-controlled gym may also help you burn additional calories.

**Consider caffeine and chili peppers.** Small studies show that drinking caffeine-ated beverages, such as tea and coffee, increases your heart rate and leads to a temporary boost in metabolism. Tentative research also points to the power of chili peppers—both the hot variety that contains capsaicin and the milder sweet peppers containing capsinoid—to help increase metabolism. But don’t start up a coffee habit or make your food unpalatably spicy in an effort to lose weight.

The most important components of keeping weight off remain the same: increasing activity and limiting calories. But by following the metabolism-boosting pointers above, you may have an easier time keeping those extra pounds from creeping up on you.

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**Trusting the calorie count.** Federal law requires chain restaurants to post calorie counts for the foods they serve. But are they accurate? According to a study of 42 fast food and sit-down chain restaurants sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the answer overall is yes. In fact, researchers found that 52 percent of menu items tested actually had fewer calories than posted. But be wary of lower-calorie menu options. Foods under 600 calories per serving were the most likely to have 100 or more calories than advertised. Such discrepancies frequently occurred in sit-down chain restaurants, where serving sizes are often larger.

**Omega-3 and heart attack risk.** Not getting enough omega-3—a heart-healthy fatty acid found commonly in fatty fish—may increase your risk of death from heart disease. An analysis of 1,487 heart attack sufferers found that seven key risk factors for heart attack were present in those with low levels of omega-3. These risk factors were smoking.