

What can help predict weight loss success?

By Jackie Hughes

Looking to drop some pounds? Meal tracking or self-monitoring may be the key. And while writing down everything you eat might seem like a long and arduous task, new research shows it's pretty quick and easy.

The research published in the March issue of *Obesity* studied people enrolled in an online behavioral weight loss program. Participants were asked to record the calories and fat in all the foods and drinks they consumed on a given day. They also were asked to note how their food was prepared and what portion sizes they ate. Researchers examined data from 142 participants over six months.

Their results?

The researchers found that participants only spent 14.6 minutes a day meal tracking or self-monitoring the food they ate.

"People hate it [dietary self-monitoring]; they think it's onerous and awful, but the question we had was: How much time does dietary self-monitoring really take?" Jean Harvey, chair of the Nutrition and Food Sciences Department at the University of Vermont and the lead author of the study, said in a press release. "The answer is, not very much."

And success wasn't a factor of the time spent on self-monitoring.

"Those who self-monitored three or more times per day, and were consistent day after day, were the most successful," Harvey said in a release. "It seems to be the act of self-monitoring itself that makes the difference – not the time spent or the details included."

Experts agree.

"This definitely goes along with what I see in practice," says Dana Artinyan, a registered dietitian at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center in Chicago, Ill. "Food journals are often stigmatized for being too labor intense when in reality they can be a quick and effective way to bring awareness to the foods people eat every day."

And it doesn't have to take long.

"I often will log my own food intake just to gain more experience with different apps like My Fitness Pal," she explains. "From my personal experience it takes 15-20 minutes total a day. You can do it on the train, on the bus or even while waiting in line. It doesn't have to be a long arduous task."

Artinyan says food tracking can be extremely beneficial for patients because many don't remember what foods they eat in any given week, let alone the portions. Food tracking can help them recognize appropriate portions and bring awareness to foods they may eat without realizing it, like the piece of candy from a coworker or the handful of chips while making dinner.

But self-monitoring isn't for everyone.

"Some patients do find the practice to be regimented and not sustainable, so I typically recommend trying it for a week to recognize patterns," she explains.

Another group that should avoid self-monitoring – patients with a history of eating disorders.

"For these patients logging foods and calories can exacerbate disordered eating habits," Artinyan says.

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Wishing you joy and good health,
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