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BY TERRI D'ARRIGO

THE STUBBORN SCALE

Getting Off A Weight-Loss Plateau

Ah, success. You've been doing well in your weight-loss efforts, staying the course despite temptation, and the pounds have been coming off.

Or, they had been. Now the scale is stuck. You haven't altered your routine, but several weeks have gone by, and you keep seeing the same number. You've even changed the batteries in the scale, just to be sure.

Welcome to a weight-loss plateau. Plateaus commonly occur several weeks or months into weight loss, and they can last anywhere from a few days to a few months.

Ironically, one of the main reasons for this frustrating event is your success: The less you weigh, the fewer calories your body needs. If you don't adjust your efforts accordingly, by eating less or exercising more, your weight will level off.

The key to getting off a plateau is to remember the math, says Bret Goodpaster, PhD, assistant professor of medicine and director of the exercise physiology laboratory at the University of Pittsburgh's Obesity Nutrition Research Center. To lose a pound, you have to burn 3,500 more calories than you take in. Spread

out over a week, this is a deficit of 500 calories per day.

With that in mind, go over your eating plan, and see where you can cut some calories. For example, if you're currently eating 1,800 calories per day, it might be time to cut down to about 1,600. Your dietitian can show you the finer points of doing this without sacrificing nutrition or developing erratic blood glucose levels.

Yet cutting calories is only half the equation, says Goodpaster. You'll need to increase your physical activity, too.

"Studies show that people do lose weight just by dieting, but it's hard to keep it off," he says. "Exercise teaches the body to burn calories more efficiently and helps you burn fat."

If you haven't been exercising, now is the time to start (with your doctor's approval). But if you *have* been exercising, Goodpaster suggests that you increase the frequency or intensity, particularly with aerobic exercise. "You'll burn far more calories with aerobic activity," he says. "I don't want to discount resistance [weight] training because it's very important [for general health], but it's not likely to have a profound effect [on your weight]."

You may have read that increasing muscle mass will boost your metabolism, but there's a big caveat, he says. "The amount of muscle mass you'd have to gain would be more than most people can do. We're talking body-building programs."

He suggests that you try different activities, not because of the common misperception that you can "shock" your metabolism into burning more calories by doing something new, but because it will keep you from getting bored. "It has more to do with your mental ability to stay with the program," he says. "You'll be more likely to stay active."

Finally, be patient. Plateaus can be frustrating, but giving up guarantees that your progress will stop. Remember that over time even a daily deficit of just 350 calories will add up: In 10 days, that's a pound.

"The best-selling books out there make it seem like it's going to happen overnight and it's not," Goodpaster says. "Sometimes we have a hard time listening to the voice of reason, but it's really all about moderation."

Terri D'Arrigo is an associate editor of Diabetes Forecast.