

Chapter 1

Living a Low-Calorie Lifestyle

In This Chapter

- ▶ Making initial decisions about how much weight to lose
- ▶ Experiencing a new low-calorie way of life
- ▶ Winning at losing weight with great tools and techniques
- ▶ Sticking with the plan through trials and tribulations

On any given day, one out of four Americans is doing something to try to lose weight. They change their diets, join gyms, swallow pills, and even undergo elective surgery in a never-ending attempt to shed those excess pounds. In spite of all these efforts, relatively few people are successful at losing weight and keeping it off. Most diets and weight-loss gimmicks are, at best, short-term solutions for weight control, and short-term means it's only for now, not forever.

By definition, your diet is simply the food you eat from day to day. With or without a plan, you could be following a vegetarian diet, a low-fat diet, a high-fiber diet, or a low-carbohydrate diet. Whatever it is, your current diet is how you choose to eat. A low-calorie diet is another story, though, with an altogether different meaning. To some people, it implies deprivation, suffering, and hunger. I'm here to change that point of view.

To say you're going on a diet implies that, at some point, you'll come off that diet and eat differently. It's temporary, and a temporary way of eating only has temporary effects. Look at it this way: If you have heart disease, your doctor or dietitian will probably recommend a low-fat diet. You can't follow that diet for just six months and expect it to keep your arteries clear forever. You must cut calories to lose weight and, at the same time, develop healthier eating habits. You can't turn back to your old habits if you expect to maintain a healthier weight for the rest of your life.

This chapter introduces the idea that the key to successful weight control is developing a low-calorie lifestyle plan. This chapter also explores the many facets of living a life devoted to lighter eating and better health. In this chapter you can find an overview of the tools you need, the plan's details, and the resources available to help you lose weight without fear of gaining it back. I discuss everything in greater detail throughout the book.

Deciding How Much Weight to Lose

Think about a time when you were at a comfortable weight. Now, think about how much you weigh right now. The difference between the two is probably the number of pounds you're aiming to lose. That's probably your long-term goal (which means you don't expect it to happen tomorrow, this week, or even this month, but you do expect it to happen eventually). Of course, you can rely on much more scientific ways to determine how much weight you can or need to lose. In fact, government health experts have established standards for healthy weights that you can use to gauge your own weight.



Check with your doctor before you start any weight-loss program to be sure that your weight-loss goals and strategies are appropriate for your age and state of health.

In this book, you can find six easy steps to help you figure out how much weight you need to lose, whether or not your weight is putting you at risk for serious health problems, and how to calculate a safe and effective calorie range within which you can lose excess weight. You can find more info on the first three steps in Chapter 2 and the last three steps in Chapter 3.

1. Consult the healthy weight range chart in Chapter 2 to figure out how far you are from a healthy weight for your height.

Using charts and formulas for figuring out how much weight you need to lose, or how much you need to weigh after you lose the weight, helps keep your expectations within realistic limits. Your healthiest weight isn't necessarily the same as someone else's, even if that person is the same height. You may be built differently. That's why, when you look at a healthy weight range chart, you can see a range of acceptable weights for each height listed.

2. Figure out your Body Mass Index (BMI) from the chart and formula.

This step helps you figure out whether or not your weight puts you at risk of developing or worsening chronic medical conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease.

3. Determine your waist-to-hip ratio.

This ratio tells you if the way your weight is distributed on your body puts you at higher risk of developing chronic medical conditions.

4. Figure out your basic calorie needs.

Knowing this information can help you figure out the minimum number of calories you need in your diet every day.

5. Calculate the number of calories you can eat and still lose weight.

This information is vital because it tells you the maximum number of calories you can allow in your diet every day.

If you're overweight, blame your fat

When you're overweight, you're also overfat. Otherwise, being overweight would mean that your excess weight is coming from muscles, bones, skin, and water. That's not likely unless you've built up so much muscle from strength training that you've gained weight from it, or you're retaining fluids for some reason, or you have impossibly dense bones that are adding to your normal weight. At most, you may be a few pounds over your usual weight if your extra weight is muscle from working out or water retention from hormone fluctuations. But neither of these are weight concerns.

Being overweight from extra fat, however, means that losing weight will probably be beneficial to your health. If you have a family history of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol, or certain types of cancer, losing weight by cutting calories and getting more exercise can lower your risk of developing these conditions. If you already have these conditions, losing weight may improve them. (You can find more information about weight-related medical conditions in Chapter 16.)

6. Give yourself a range of calories within which you can eat and still lose weight.

If you know this information, you can try to stick to the bottom of the calorie range and on days when you feel you need to eat more food, you can go as high as the top of the calorie range.



Many dieters aim for an unrealistic weight. If you have a tendency to compare your weight and shape to other people, you may find yourself wanting to lose more weight than is reasonable. Don't compare your size and shape to others. The combined effect of your age, rate of metabolism, body type, genetic predispositions, exercise habits, dieting habits, and the number of fat cells you carry in your body ultimately determine how much weight you can lose and what your body will look like at any weight. That package of factors belongs to you and nobody else and that's what makes everyone's body different. You can't stretch yourself any taller, change your bone structure, or borrow someone else's genes. Be realistic in your expectations and goal setting and spend your time planning to get into your own best possible shape.

If you're a control freak, you're not going to like the fact that even though you can control the amount of food you eat, and the amount of exercise you do, and even the way your mind works when it comes to losing weight, you may not have as much control as you want over how much you actually weigh. You can make every effort in the world to get down below, say, 120 pounds, but nothing short of starvation will get you there or keep you there if it's not a reasonable weight for you.

Understanding How to Live a Healthy Low-Calorie Lifestyle

Living a low-calorie lifestyle means adopting healthier eating and exercise habits for the rest of your life. It starts with a diet plan that cuts back on the number of calories you've been consuming so that you can achieve a healthier weight. Your new diet plan is designed to help you lose weight safely and effectively, and to grow into a lifelong plan for weight maintenance.

A safe low-calorie diet not only supplies enough energy to get you through each day, but it also provides the essential nutrients you need to get from food to stay healthy. The fewer calories you consume, the harder it is to get enough of those essential nutrients. The way to get the most nutritional value from your diet at any calorie level is to eat a well-balanced diet that contains a wide variety of foods. In Chapter 3, you find more information about the nuts and bolts of a nutritionally sound low-calorie diet.



Knowing exactly how many calories actually go into a low-calorie diet is also crucial. Chapter 6 contains four weeks of daily menu plans that contain from 1,000 to 1,500 calories a day. You may be thinking these menus contain the maximum number of calories you need to consume on a low-calorie diet, but in fact, I call them minimum-calorie menus. Yes, you need to put a top limit on your daily calories when you're on a low-cal diet to lose weight. But you need to put a bottom limit on your calorie count too, because if you go too low, you'll just trip yourself up. You'll find yourself caught in the type of starve/binge cycle that sabotages many a dieter's best intentions. When you start cutting calories, you can work within this range of 1,000 to 1,500 calories because most people can lose weight in this range. The top of this range (1,500 calories) may even be too low for you. If that's the case, you can add calories back in until you get to a point where you're more satisfied with the amount of food you're eating and still able to lose weight. You can always cut back again if you stop losing weight before you reach your goal.

You *never* want to go lower than 1,000 calories on a self-help diet plan. Just about anyone who needs to lose weight can lose it on a diet that allows between 1,000 and 1,500 calories, so you don't need to deprive yourself and eat less. Keep in mind that the closer you get to your goal weight, the more you may have to cut calories in order to keep losing. So first start your diet at the highest calorie count that, combined with enough physical exercise, allows you to lose about a pound or two a week.



Two things happen when you don't consume enough calories.

- ✓ Your body puts the brakes on your metabolism and you start burning calories less efficiently. That's your body's way of saving itself when it's afraid you're going to starve. If you don't give your body enough food, it has no way of knowing whether or not you'll be giving it more and so it prepares itself for living on less by slowing down the rate at which it uses food to produce energy.
- ✓ The other thing that happens when you don't eat enough is more immediate and more obvious: You get very hungry. If you allow yourself to get too hungry, guess what happens? You overeat. And there goes your diet.

Getting Started on Your Low-Calorie Plan

Living a low-cal lifestyle means putting your all into it — setting your life up in ways that accommodate your diet, such as stocking your kitchen with low-calorie cooking equipment, discovering new cooking techniques, if necessary, committing to an exercise program, and taking the time to find out as much as you can about food, nutrition, and fitness.

The very first step in a self-help weight-loss plan, though, is to look inward and figure out everything you can about yourself and about your eating and exercise habits. Then you can begin to change your bad habits and practice healthier new ones. Awareness is the first step because you have to know what you're doing wrong before you can make it right. (See Chapter 4 for more about looking inward.)

Psyching up with goals, tools, and more



Planning and record keeping are essential tools for weight loss because they provide both structure and a way of monitoring whether your program is working for you. I treat the following tools of the trade separately in this book, but you can keep these records in one journal. That way, you always know exactly where to find each one when you need it.

- ✓ Establishing short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals (Chapter 4)
- ✓ Keeping a food diary (Chapter 4)
- ✓ Filling in a weight change chart (Chapter 4)
- ✓ Maintaining an exercise log (Chapter 8)



You can also use this same journal to write down all your thoughts and feelings while you're trying to commit to a low-calorie lifestyle. If your journal is large enough, you can write down any interesting tips or advice you pick up along the way or even store a special low-calorie recipe that you don't have time to prepare right now but hope to use in the future. If you want to be ultraserious with your notebook, a three-ring binder with pocket inserts and tabbed dividers may not be a bad investment.

Setting up a low-calorie kitchen

People who are successful at weight loss often cook many of their own meals as a way of controlling the types and amounts of food they eat. You can find everything you need to know to get cooking in Chapter 5, which discusses healthy eating guidelines and shows you how to use those guidelines to create a nutritionally balanced low-calorie diet plan.

Chapter 5 also contains plenty of aisle-to-aisle advice on the best foods to buy in the supermarket to create healthful, low-calorie meals, how to stock your cupboards with the most healthful convenience foods, and how to equip your kitchen with a good selection of cookware and tools for steaming, poaching, and other great low-cal cooking methods.

Planning marvelous meals

The daily menu plans in Chapter 6, and the alternative “theme” menu plans in Chapter 7, are all designed to keep your diet life interesting by including different types of foods at every meal. If you're a creature of habit, you'll probably pick two or three menu plans at first and repeat them day after day. That's perfectly okay, as long as you don't get bored. And if you do eventually get bored, you have plenty of other menu plans to choose.

I developed the recipes in Chapters 12, 13, 14, and 15, covering breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, and desserts, to fit right into the menu plans in Chapter 6. I also designed them to be appealing to friends and family who aren't watching their weight. In other words, they taste good. They don't taste like “diet food,” which is the beauty of preparing your own low-calorie meals from scratch, rather than relying entirely on calorie-controlled frozen dinners or liquid meal substitutes from the supermarket. After you've lost weight, you won't have to make a huge transition from “diet” food to “real” food because you're already eating real food every day.



When you cook, pay attention to the serving sizes of the dishes you prepare. If a recipe yields 4 servings, then one-fourth of the dish is the amount of food you can eat. By taking a good look at the portioned-out foods you prepare at home, you can figure out how to eyeball portion sizes when you eat out, and you can develop a good sense of approximately how many calories are on your plate, regardless of where you eat.

Exercising to burn calories and improve your health

As a dietitian, I focus mainly on food and nutrition, so to tell you the truth, it was years before I really understood just how important physical activity is to losing weight, maintaining weight, and staying as physically and mentally fit as possible. In fact, many people focus on food more than anything else when it comes to healthier living. You can only make so many changes at once and when the issue is weight control, it's natural to look at your diet first. But I'm here to tell you now that food is one half of the calorie equation and exercise is the other half. They carry equal weight, so to speak.

In Chapter 8, you find out that strength training is just as important as aerobic exercise. This chapter also discusses the many benefits of mind-body exercises, such as yoga, pilates, and t'ai chi. Make sure you check out the long list of ailments that exercise can help prevent and cure, because it's good motivational material for sticking to an exercise program for life.

Even if you already recognize the benefits of exercise in a low-calorie lifestyle, you may have trouble actually fitting it into your daily routine. Fear not; in Chapter 8, there are plenty of tips for finding your motivation to exercise, choosing the type of exercise that's right for you, and fitting exercise into your already crowded schedule.



As you age, staying the same shape and weight you were when you were younger becomes more difficult. For many, it's a never-ending battle trying to stop your various body parts from getting thick and baggy. Although some health experts say gaining some weight in midlife is normal, you may not like the direction in which your body is moving. I'm with you on that one! Eating light is important for both your weight and health as you get older, but exercise is the real weapon against the stalling metabolism and thinning muscle tissue that causes your weight to creep up with age.

Staying on the Low-Calorie Track

Food isn't everything when it comes to weight control. Sure, excess food packs on the pounds, and a lack of food helps you shed them, so food plays an extremely important role. And you absolutely have to know how to eat better in order to lose weight and maintain a healthier weight for life.

But consider this point: Everyone eats, but not everyone becomes overweight from eating. Some people seem to live on junk food but never gain weight. So there must be something else to this weight stuff, right? Right. And that something else may have more to do with what's happening in your mind than what's happening on your plate.



If you've been on weight-loss diets before, one of your first steps at this point is to look back over your previous diets and see what worked and what didn't. Focus on the time period when you started gaining back the weight you'd lost. What was going on? Why did you start overeating again? Or did you just stop going to the gym? Remembering what went wrong with your past diet plans helps prevent the same thing from happening again.

Even if this time is your first attempt at weight loss, read on, because it pays to be prepared for the challenges faced by most dieters. In the following sections, I discuss the roadblocks you may face, explain when and how to reassess your plan to be sure it continues to work for you, and give you tips for seeking extra help.

Working through challenges

What happens when you're trying to stick to a low-cal diet and you find yourself in the midst of an office party or your parents' 25th wedding anniversary celebration? One thing is for sure: You need a plan. For instance, you can bring a very light lunch the day of the office party and plan in advance to have a light dinner waiting at home. You can spend an extra 20 minutes at the gym the morning of the event.



You can find more ideas for dealing with special circumstances in Chapter 9, but remember that you're not going to blow your diet with one evening of celebratory overeating. The best advice anyone can give you is simply to enjoy yourself, try not to go overboard, and get back on your plan the next day. Every day can't be a party when you're on a low-calorie plan to lose weight, but when you're watching what you eat on a regular basis, you do have room in your calorie budget for occasional excess.

The challenges you face when you're trying to lose weight also include the daily events in your life that trigger you to eat in response to your emotions or to eat when you're not really hungry. The "cure" is to recognize and address these situations so you can eliminate eating triggers that have nothing to do with real hunger. Some of these triggers, such as boredom, loneliness, and anxiety, come from within you; others, such as dealing with an unpleasant work situation or an angry spouse, come from outside.



Regardless of where your overeating triggers come from, you have to figure out how to resist them before you can move on to a healthy weight. Otherwise, you'll continue to turn to food whenever you're coping with emotional situations. Chapter 9 discusses the many forms of emotional eating and offers solutions for dealing with trigger situations head on.

Assessing your progress from time to time



When you take the self-help approach to weight loss, you have to monitor yourself because you're the only one who can do it. (If you have a diet buddy, then you can monitor each other; see Chapter 11 about finding a diet buddy.) Even with a diet buddy, self-monitoring is important. Basically, you're both the dieter and the diet counselor. After you set up the diet plan, the dieter has to check in periodically with the diet counselor to make sure it's working. To self-monitor, stop occasionally and ask yourself the following questions:

- ✓ Are you happy with your program?
- ✓ Are you losing weight at a steady pace?
- ✓ Are you reaching your short-term goals?
- ✓ Is your support system working for you?
- ✓ What can you do to improve your low-calorie lifestyle?
- ✓ Does your food plan need revision?
- ✓ What's your next step?

Some of the tools you use to assess your diet include your scale (for weekly weigh-ins), your weight change chart (from Chapter 4), and any other logs and journals you use for keeping track of the food you eat, the calories you consume, the exercise you do, and any other information that may change as you progress from a low-calorie diet into a low-calorie lifestyle.

After you start your low-calorie plan, you can check out Chapter 7 for tips on reviewing your initial progress to make sure you're taking your plan in the right direction to ultimately reach your goals. When you've reached your goal

weight and begin a weight-maintenance phase, Chapter 10 is a great resource for advice on adjusting your food and exercise plans and making a lifelong habit of using the weight-control techniques that have worked for you.

Looking for help

Presumably, you bought (or borrowed) this book because you're looking for help losing weight. Good idea! This book can help you figure out everything you need to know about losing weight and keeping the weight off. But that doesn't mean you won't, at some point, need additional help. Don't worry; help is everywhere!



If you're doing everything you know how to do to lose weight but you're just not losing anything, then seek help. Your network of family and friends is the first place to start. Successful dieters have a solid support system in place to cheer them on and help them build and maintain a healthier lifestyle. Most people can't do it alone.



At some point, you may want to look outside your immediate circle of family and friends for additional support and advice. Depending on what type of help you need, you can look in the following places:

- ✓ You can find local branches of commercial weight-loss centers in cities and towns throughout the United States and Canada.
- ✓ Many hospitals have their own in-house weight-loss programs.
- ✓ Some physicians specialize in weight control. Be sure to get a referral from someone you trust.
- ✓ Peer-led groups such as Overeaters Anonymous meet in churches, clinics, and other community centers in most cities and towns.
- ✓ A registered dietitian or state-certified nutritionist is qualified to help you formulate a weight-loss plan.
- ✓ Psychologists who practice cognitive-behavioral therapy sometimes specialize in weight issues.

Chapter 11 provides more information about how to know when you need outside help and how to go about finding it. Chapter 17, which contains ten stories from men and women who've battled their own bulges in a variety of ways, may also be helpful.



If your eating behavior is out of control and you suspect you have a full-fledged eating disorder, you can find a list of eating disorder treatment programs at www.addictionresourceguide.com.