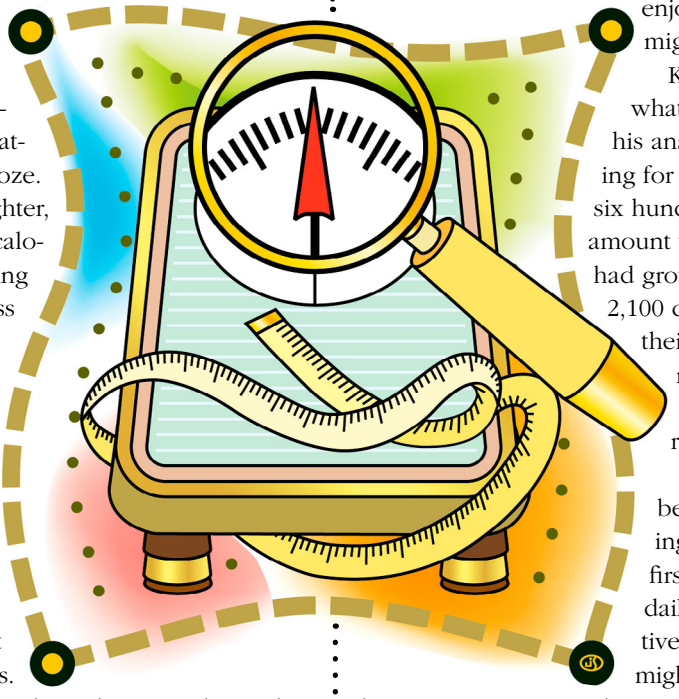
eat more, weigh less

PERIODS OF "CALORIC ABUNDANCE" APPEAR TO REV UP HOW MANY CALORIES WE BURN. HERE'S HOW. ❍ BY PORTER SHIMER

Intuitively it makes about as much sense as seeking weight-loss advice from top chef Emeril Lagassi, but you can't argue with the facts. When researchers at Baylor University's Sport Nutrition Laboratory allowed women to increase their caloric intake to as much as 2,600 calories a day following a week of being restricted to just 1,000 calories a day, the women did not regain a single ounce. Even after an entire week on the 2,600-calorie-a-day regimen, the women still had not regained any of the weight they had lost, and some even saw their weight drop.

What the women had regained, however, and happily so, was their all-important resting energy expenditure—their ability to burn calories even while just reading their latest issue of *diane* or taking a snooze. Despite being several pounds lighter, the women were back to burning calories at their prediet rate—something of a miracle, given how weight loss generally works.



"Usually, resting energy expenditure is reduced when weight is lost," says Richard B. Kreider, PhD, FACSM (Fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine), who is professor and chair of the Exercise and Sport Nutrition Lab in the Department of Health, Human Performance, and Recreation at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Kreider and his team of researchers have been studying the Curves program since the fall of 2002.

Why It Works

Thought to be a holdover from earlier times in human history when such metabolic slowdowns would help protect us from starvation during all-too-common famines, the effect of these slowdowns today has been the dreaded weight-loss "plateau," where we seem to get stuck at a certain weight despite restricting our caloric intake.

Also a holdover from earlier times, our biology dictates that during periods of high calorie intake, metabolism speeds up. "By following periods of caloric restriction with periods of relative caloric abundance," says Kreider, "it may be possible to keep resting energy expenditure active enough to avoid the kind of metabolic slowdowns that can make weight loss difficult to sustain."

How Much, How Long

And just what sort of heights might such periods of "caloric abundance" be allowed to reach, and how long might they be enjoyed before hard-earned losses might begin to return?

Kreider can speak only in terms of what his particular study has found, but his answer seems nonetheless encouraging for anyone who likes to eat. "Twenty-six hundred calories a day wasn't the only amount we studied," he explains. "We also had groups of women consume 1,600 and 2,100 calories a day for a week following their period of weight loss, but with nowhere near the same metabolic effects that the week of 2,600 calories a day had produced."

Given that 1,000 calories a day had been the amount responsible for slowing the women's metabolisms in the first place, this figure of 2,600 calories daily for a week might be seen as a relative feast. As for how long this feasting might be enjoyed before lost weight begins to return, Kreider says that women will need to let their individual experiences be their guide.

"The women in our study still were not regaining any weight after an entire week of the 2,600-calorie-a-day regimen, but this might not prove true for everyone," says Kreider. "My suggestion would be for women simply to watch the scale and reduce caloric intake as soon as any lost weight might begin to return."

Bottom line: It seems our metabolic "furnaces" may need to be well stoked from time to time to keep calorie-burning revved. ●

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