

How I Lost 50 Pounds

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Provo, Utah, July 2011

Between April 2010 and February 2011, I lost 50 lbs. I also lost 6 inches off my waist (size 42 to size 36). I didn't change the way I exercised. I didn't change what I ate. I simply changed how much I ate.

It started in April 2010. Kay's doctor told her she needed to lose weight because of cholesterol and other health problems. A dietician suggested that she write down everything she eats during the day. I started writing down what I ate also. Then I started figuring out how many calories I was eating each day. I wondered how much I should be eating if I wanted to lose weight.

I went to a web site called Calorie Count (<http://caloriecount.about.com/>) and entered information about myself: weight (240 lbs), height (6-1), age (63 yrs), physical activity level (light, I walk a lot), body type (large), and nightly hours of sleep (7 hrs). The web site responded by telling me that I should weigh 190 lbs and that I could achieve that goal if I limited my daily intake to 1900 calories.

Here is an example of how much food 1900 calories is:



Breakfast

oatmeal 280
orange juice 110
milk 90
banana 105

Lunch

leftover rice & chicken 250
apple 70
2 tangelos 120

Dinner

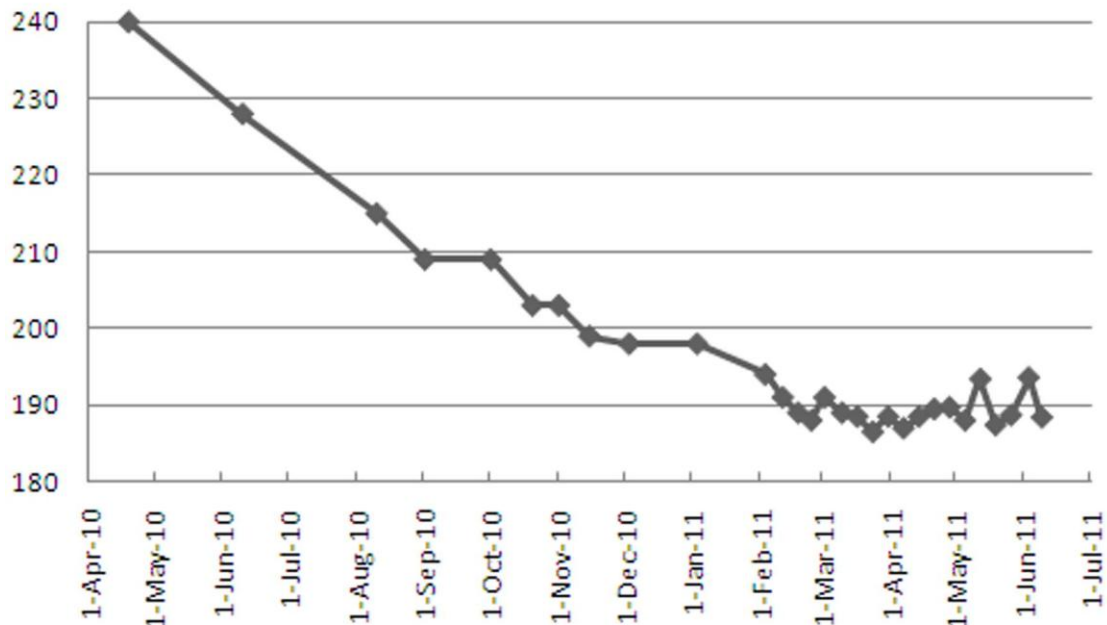
enchilada 250
salad 160
buttered toast 85
buttermilk 130
cake 250

As you can see, this is not a starvation diet. Breakfast and lunch were about the same as what I had been eating for years. What I did different was how much I ate for dinner. Before, I didn't know when to stop eating. The amazing thing was that when I reached 1900 calories, I felt satisfied. I was not

hungry. I could have eaten more, but didn't feel like I needed to. This was easy. I would have done this years ago if I had known how easy it was.

As a young adult, my weight was 165 lbs. I was skinny, and I ate a lot, and I stayed skinny. After I married Kay, I started putting on weight. I didn't like being overweight. But I love to eat. And I hate being hungry. This is why I figured I would never lose that weight. When I started counting calories, I was skeptical. I didn't really think I could lose weight without being hungry all the time.

I decided to weigh myself once a month so that if I really was losing weight, I'd be able to definitely see it. When I weighed myself after one month, I had lost about 5 lbs. I was so surprised. I didn't really think it would work that well. I continued to lose weight, month after month, and I finally reached my goal 10 months later.



At first, I counted all calories every day without exception, even at restaurants. But then, after seeing some success, I decided I could relax the restrictions a little. I don't count calories at restaurants. I don't count calories on special occasions (like Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas or parties, even refreshments at physics seminars and wedding receptions, and whenever I traveled). Those were free-calorie days. I continued to lose weight, and I was happy.

When I reached my goal, I tried a couple of strategies for maintaining my weight. I finally settled on the following. I would stop counting calories as long as my weight was below 190 lbs. I weighed myself once a week, and if my weight was above 190 lbs, I counted calories during the following week and limited my daily intake to 2000 calories. If my weight dropped below 190 lbs the following week, then I stopped counting calories again. As you see in the figure above, it worked. In fact, most weeks I was

below 190 lbs and could eat what I wanted without counting calories. This was surprising to me. I expected it to be a constant battle to keep my weight down to 190 lbs. Perhaps counting calories has helped to re-educate my eating habits so that even when I don't count calories, I am careful of what and how much I eat.

I told you earlier that I ate whatever I wanted. I need to qualify this statement. I knew that each day when I reached 1900 calories, I would have to stop eating. This affected my choice of what to eat and how much of it to eat. I didn't want to reach 1900 calories too fast. I have always eaten fresh fruit for lunch, and I have usually eaten a salad of fresh vegetables for dinner. But I started using low-fat dressings on my salad. I found that they tasted just about as good as the high-fat versions. I stopped putting syrup on my oatmeal for breakfast. It would save me 100 calories and allow me to eat a little bit more for dinner. I stopped eating high-calorie junk food that didn't really taste that good anyway. I didn't want to waste my calories. I wanted to save the calories for the things I really liked eating. So counting calories did indirectly affect what I chose to eat.

Now for some technical details. I need to explain how I counted calories. First, nearly all food comes with nutrition facts. Here is a label on a low-fat salad dressing:



The above label shows that a single serving contains 50 cal and that a serving size is 29 g. Using simple math, we obtain $50/29=1.7$ cal/g. Kay bought a digital kitchen scale. We weighed our food and calculated how many calories were in it. For example, consider a salad.



I put the plate on the scale and then zeroed the scale. Then I put on the vegetables. Lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers all have about the same calorie content, 0.2 cal/g. We see that the vegetables weighed 273 g which is $273 \times 0.2 = 55$ cal. Then I zeroed the scale again and added salad dressing. (I like lots of dressing.) The dressing weighed 114 g which is $114 \times 1.7 = 194$ cal. The total calorie content of the salad is $55 + 194 = 249$ cal. (Maybe I put on too much dressing. I'll put on less dressing next time. Knowing the number of calories helps me change some of my eating habits.)

Some food (like fresh produce) does not come with nutrition facts on the label. I look them up on the internet, using the Calorie Count web site. When we had home-made dishes, we weighed every ingredient, adding up all of the calories. Here is an example of how we did that for lasagna.



lasagna noodles	840
Italian Sausage	2090
cheese	640
Italian sauce	250
cottage cheese	360
pico de gallo sauce	50
total	= 4200

After it was cooked, the total weight was 2010 g (not counting the glass casserole dish), so the calorie content of the lasagna was $4200/2010=2.1$ cal/g. (Note that half the calories came from the sausage. It would have been better to use ground turkey instead of sausage.) The serving shown above on the right weighed 220 g, so it contained $220 \times 2.1 = 420$ cal. At first, Kay thought that calorie counting was really a pain, but she really liked how I was looking with less weight. Eventually she found calorie counting to be kind of fun.

It probably isn't necessary to calculate calories in as much detail as I do. I think that estimates, using information from the internet, would work just as well. But I'm a scientist, and I love collecting data. Over the years, I've learned how to collect data carefully, especially if the results of my experiment were important. Losing weight was really important to me, so I didn't mind counting calories carefully.