

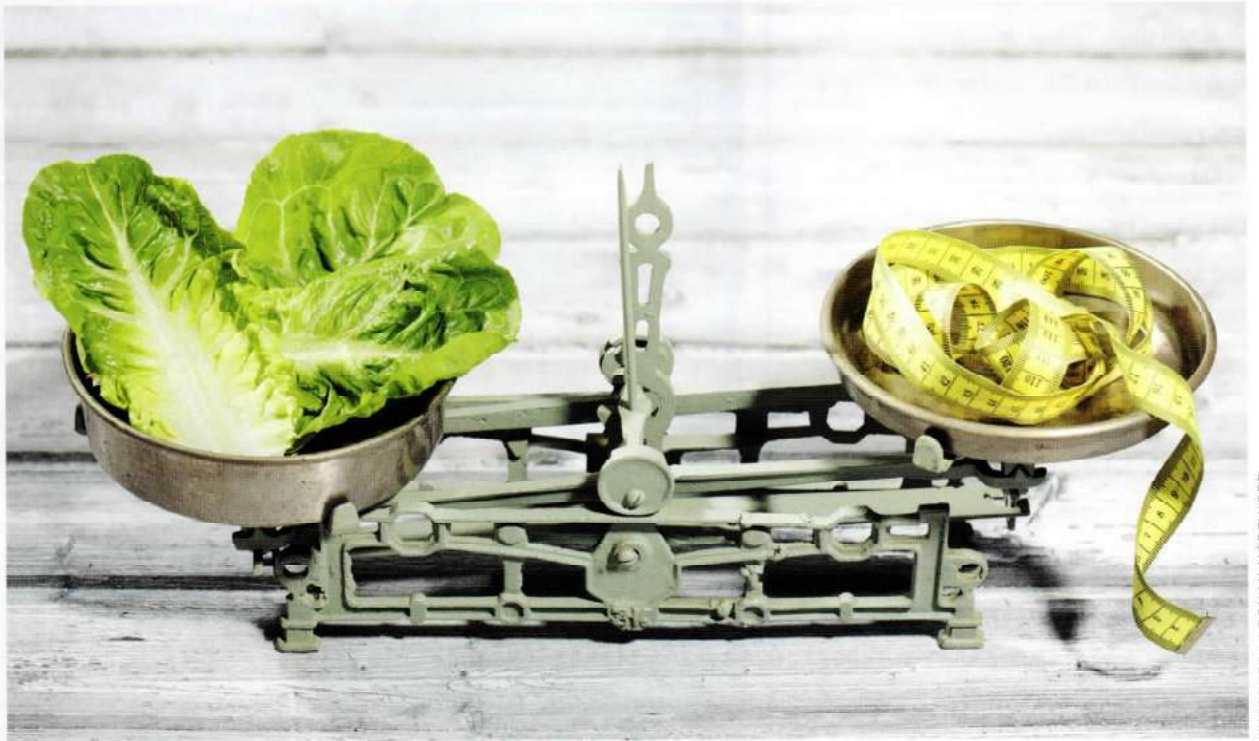
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## Losing It New Research Offers New Hope for Weight Loss

ALLISON HAMS SARGENT **writer**



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**when the** gray, chilly days of winter envelop us hardy New England souls, we know exactly how to cope: brew some hot chocolate and bring on the cookies. But, in the season of eggnog and stuffing, many of us struggle with extra pounds. We feel indebted to bulky sweaters and camouflaging down coats. Come January, we look to the New Year for a reset and promise ourselves: “This is the year! This time I am going to lose that weight.”

In the end, though, the question is: How? A meander down the aisle at local grocery stores might utterly baffle dieters looking for guidance in the vast and teeming weight loss ecosphere. Diets come and go with alarming velocity. “With all the revolving information out there, people are really confused,” says psychologist Dr. Marilou Shaughnessy. “Eat this, don’t eat that. It’s better to reframe the question: How am I going to take care of myself?”

The 60-billion-dollar diet industry has made a big business out of sorting foods into easy-to-understand categories. “Messaging matters,” says Jonah Soolman, a Wellesley-based nutritionist. “People get the idea that food is clean or unclean, healthy or unhealthy. In our practice, we

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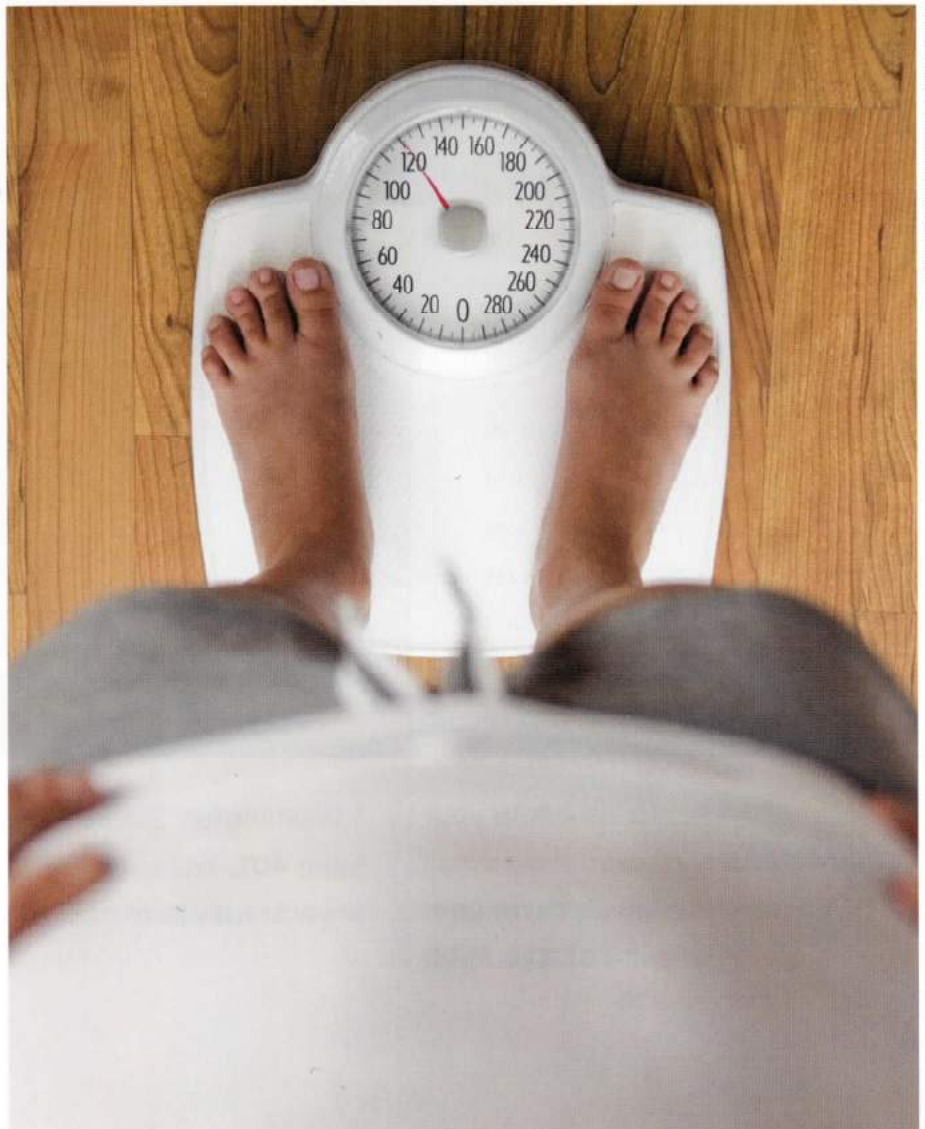
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fitness & health “success of traditional diets is extremely limited”

promote the idea that all food can be acceptable in some way.” Indeed, multiple trends such as clean eating, the Paleo diet, intermittent fasting, early calorie loading, the Whole30 plan, not to mention powders and shakes, are enough to make the strongest among us head straight to the chip bag or a chocolate bar.

“The truth is that diets don’t work,” says Dr. Sheila Partridge, a bariatric surgeon at Newton-Wellesley Hospital. “Statistics show that only one out of 100 people will be able to keep the weight off after a diet.” Studies bear out the sad fact that the success of traditional diets is extremely limited.

“People think, eat less and exercise more, and you’ll keep the pounds off,” says Soolman, “and for many, it’s just not true.” The conventional wisdom scolds us with the maxim that weight loss is mind over (very stubborn) matter but that old-school thinking isn’t supported by current data. “It is so difficult because there is so much shame associated with extra pounds,” says Dr. Shaughnessy. “It’s heartbreaking.”



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The notion that people just aren't trying hard enough is frustrating too for people working with those trying to slim down. "It's not their fault; it's not willpower or discipline," says Soolman. "It's just biology; our bodies just so often do not respond to dieting." As science begins to untangle the complexities of weight loss, some subtle and overt barriers to success are being uncovered. In fact, encouraging research shows that a host of outside factors, some totally untethered to food consumption, can impact an individual's quest to shed pounds.

For example, researchers have been paying close attention to the connection between an individual's microbiome and weight loss. "The microbiome is the ecosystem we co-evolved with. There are trillions of microorganisms in our body, mostly in our gut," explains Dr. Janine Pardo, of the Weston Internal Medicine and Wellness Center. "They are involved in our inflammation response and in our ability to burn calories." If a person's microbiome is out of balance due to poor diet, stress, or lack of sleep, inflammation increases, which in turn encourages the body to hold on to excess weight. If the inflammation 'switch' is constantly on, the body's response can lead to cardiovascular disease or stroke. "The foods we consume have a direct impact on the balance of the bacteria," says Dr. Pardo. "Sugar, for example, will promote inflammation, versus a food like kale, which will promote a healthier balance and promote 'good bugs,' so to speak."

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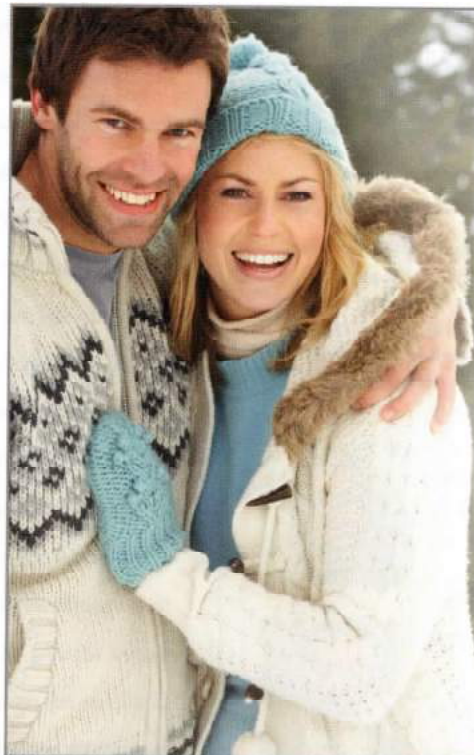


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If our bodies are an assembly of highly sophisticated interconnected systems, it makes sense that what we consume impacts the whole organism. Barbara Southcote, a health services nutritionist at Wellesley College, incorporates that thinking when counseling young women. “I provide students with medical nutrition therapy based on whole foods that naturally support the microbiome and discuss adding foods with an anti-inflammatory effect,” she says.

Microbiomes are unique to each person. “They are as individual as a fingerprint, so even healthy foods might promote inflammation in certain people. It can be super frustrating,” says Dr. Pardo. “You hit a [weight loss] plateau and don’t understand what the problem is.” A health professional can assess a microbiome through a stool sample and mouth swab. In addition, there are lab tests that can pinpoint variables within the norm. “This is at the forefront of evidence-based research. The science is there and it’s irrefutable,” says Dr. Pardo.

The study of epigenetics is another area of excitement for researchers. “It is the science of how our genes are shaped by our environment, which includes food,” says Dr. Pardo. Scientists have discovered that environmental factors like food, sleep, or stress trigger our genes, either silencing them or stimulating them. A person can be eating healthy food but it can be a mismatch for their distinct genetic mutation. “Stressors can cause overactive genes,” she says. “We can see changes happen on a cellular level.” Dr. Pardo educates her patients on this new research. She says, “We need to be thinking about their microbiome and their epigenetics, because they can be a huge barrier for someone maintaining a healthy weight.”

Pardo cautions that biology is not necessarily destiny, however. The fundamentals of weight loss still apply to some extent. “But the evolution of the science has reinforced those core principals,” she says. “It is so empowering for people to not feel like a victim of their own genetic makeup and know that there are some very simple things they can do.”

So, in this brave new world of cellular detective work and individual investigation, is there no place for some of the weight-loss trends in healthy eating? “Some of the big programs like Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig still can have value. They provide a lot of tools and support systems, and they are affordable,” says Dr. Shaughnessy. Other approaches like the Whole30 diet pass muster with the experts as well, if only as a starting point for a more generally healthy approach to eating. “These diet platforms can be a great way for people to do their own self investigation, and they can be somewhat sustainable,” says Dr. Pardo. And, of course, cutting out empty calories from highly processed foods and beverages gets a collective thumbs up.

But the best method to bring about permanent change may be as simple as listening to the body’s conversation with the brain. “We need to get people to pay more attention to the internal signals that their bodies are sending them,” says Soolman. “We need to be able to trust our bodies to tell us when we are hungry or full.” Experts agree on giving ourselves a break. “Change of any kind is difficult and slow to happen,” says Southcote. “I try to encourage my students to come up with one goal or change and try it for a month and go from there.” **WV**

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