Big pat to beat the bulge

Shedding weight is a complex process that is affected by one's brain, genes and hormones

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People are constantly going on different diets in the hope of shedding some weight, but most know it is an easy task to trim their figure. People gain weight when they consume more calories than they need. The opposite holds true; i.e., watch one’s diet over the long term can be a hard task indeed. Indeed, doctors say that losing weight is a complex process with many stumbling blocks.

The brain

The brain works in a way that can scupper diet plans, as a recent Nanyang Technological University (NTU) study on compensatory behaviours has shown. The research showed that people are both stuck less if they eat regular eating that is healthy and filling later in the day. But if the impromptu meal is poor in "healthy" because it is significantly lower in calories, that makes them more prone to binge eating, which in turn triggers the food-associate hormones, for instance, "parati- patients have a greater tendency to snack more often to the diet is that if people anticipate that they are going to be doing something that would allow them to lower their overall energy balance (by eating a low-calorie meal or exercising), they would tend to increase their food consumption. Many young people, especially young women, tend to be restricted eaters. They are the ones who are most confused when it comes to eating. "The conflict occurs because restricted eaters have two polarizing goals—one is to be healthy and have a healthy weight and another is to consume delicious, indulgent food," said Dr Janice Sim, a research fellow at the NTU School of Social Workers, who worked on the study with Assistant Professor Beng Chee Chua, a psychology professor at the same school.

Prof Choo said: "The harder you try to lose weight, the more you want to compensate for your efforts. People who go on diets to restrained what and how much they eat may be trying to balance pleasures with pain." They are more likely to think that they can enjoy and indulge in other situations because they have made a sacrifice by going to gym or making that little bit of effort, he said. "This is the issue with this that they may overindulge." What you can do: People can be more aware of their compensatory ing- indulgent manner, which is a trend among those who monitor their diet more, said the authors of the study, who are affiliated with the Singapore Institute for Clinical Sciences, a branch of the Agency for Science, Technology and Research.

The research has shown what you eat, if you must, but only after comple- ments a healthy behaviour or eating a healthy meal. And if you are going to indulge, be mindful of the tendency to overeat, they said. The authors also said health- promoting initiatives may need to take into account how "healthy" ar- cedices of foods are framed or promoted to consumers.

The hormones

Doctors say weight loss is too.

Dr Nishit Mistry, a consultant en- doocrinologist at Raffles Hospital, said the common misconception is that if you reduce your intake by 800 calories every day, you will con- tinue to lose weight. "But when you lose weight, your body goes into a hibernating mode. Once you lose over many months, your hunger hormones will rise. You feel hungrier and your body wants to store more fuel as it senses that it is going into starva- tion mode."

This also tends to a slowdown in metabolism, which means you burn fewer calories. "It becomes more difficult."

He said losing more than 3 to 4kg or about 1 per cent of one's body weight is tough. "If you are going to cut back by about one day on the low-800 diet, you don't work, but it is a minority of patients who want to lose weight have unrealistic expecta- tions."

"They hear of people losing 20 to 30kg just by eating less, but this is very difficult and almost an impossible task.

What you can do: Dr Mistry said: "If you can sustain a low-carbohydrate diet, then it is an option for some weight loss. Any form of calorie restriction of approxi- mately 800 calories a day, should lead to some weight loss in four to six months."

However, take note that after a cer- tain period, your metabolic rate slows down. You will need to further cut your calorie intake to lose more weight. This may not be sustainable.

Exercise may help you lose weight, but it cannot help you maintain your weight. There are appetite suppressants doctors can prescribe, including a new one called Saxenda, which has been marketed daily. But if your body mass index is more than 35.5, which is extreme obesity, there is only one option— bariatric surgery, said Dr Mistry. Like the medication, the surgery helps, but it is not a magic pill. "You are not going to lose weight if you stand in the queue at McDonald's every day," said Dr Mistry. "I've had patients who gained weight after the surgery. You can put a hand in someone's stomach, but not in his brain."

At the end of the day, while there are more treatments available these days, someone who is aiming to lose weight needs to be committed to doing so in a healthy manner.

The genes and habits

Many studies have also shown that genes can also affect people's ability to lose weight.

They can affect a person's struc- tural build and his capacity for build- ing muscle mass, said Dr Derek Koh, who heads Thomson Wellness Clinic at Novena. And although muscles do help people burn calories, there are those who simply don't like to over- eat or others who gravitate to- wards a diet.

"Every person on a crash diet, yes, you will lose weight fast as you lose water and fat, but at the end of it, if you lose more muscles, you will end up with less for burning capa- bility," said Dr Koh. "What you can do: There are a lot of interesting theories to explain why weight loss is challenging, but the solution to weight loss is in the hormone, he said.

"If I have a patient who wants to lose weight, I will persuade him to exercise and cut out salt," said Dr Koh. "For those who are strapped for time and refuse to exercise, I would ask them to reduce their salt intake."

Very often, it is people's food choices which make or break their weight-loss plan.

"Another thing is the calories you put in unconsciously. High-fat, col- lies more sometimes go unnoticed," said Dr Koh. "Exercise can burn calories, but you need to add a lot of it. Always try my patients it takes a damn lot to burn off a caloric Coke." Good nutrition is necessary to maintain muscle mass, which you should build up exercise. If you starve and can't eat for a few times a week, you will lose muscle mass," said Dr Koh.

A more holistic approach to exercise is to do anaerobic exercises, which helps burn calories, as well as resis- tance training, which helps main- tain muscle mass, he said. "You can't control your appetite with your willpower. There are cer- tain medications to help suppress your appetite," said Dr Koh.

"But some can cause insomnia and anxiety. There are people who are highly sincere and very fan- tastic, and if you give him something like this, it will make him worse."

Also, the issue with such medica- tion is that the body gets used to it after a while, as it loses its effects, he said. "We prescribe it on a case-by- case basis, for instance, to encour- age those who are middle obese and trying hard to lose weight."