

Breaking Through The Weight Loss Plateau Barrier

In treating the thousands of patients that have come through my doors at The Steelman Clinic, I can't think of a single instance when a patient I was helping to lose weight did not reach some type of weight loss plateau. And it didn't seem to matter if they were young, old, on a diet for lesser or longer periods of time or had a little or a lot to lose. Everyone inevitably runs into that stone wall where the scales refuse to budge even though they have done everything right in their dieting regime. And this is where most dieters lose their motivation making it even harder to stay on track.

Are there ways to get past this frustrating time period when the dial on the scales seems to be stuck? Absolutely! But before we get started on what you can do to get past those plateaus, here are a few pointers that you need to keep in mind:

1. If you have been averaging a weight loss of 2 lbs/week – that totals up to 104 lbs a year! Even if you are only losing just under a pound a week, that still puts you on track to lose at a rate of 40 lbs/year. The rate of weight loss is set by the difference in the number of calories it would take you to maintain your present weight and the number of calories you are eating/exercising. Only folks who have a 100 or more lbs. to lose will normally lose more than 1-2 lbs per week over a period of time. Averaging 4-6 lbs./month (1-1.5lbs./week) of fat loss is a safe and appropriate rate for most people who do not have as much to lose.

If you are doing everything you should be doing (following your diet) and still find yourself with a sudden increase of 1 or more lbs in one week, it is not due to an increase of FAT. It is usually due to water retention. There are 3500 calories in a pound of fat. So, if you gained 3 lbs, you would have had to take in an extra 10,500 calories or, in the case of gaining 3 lbs in a week, 1500 extra calories/day. Such water weight is usually lost subsequently and you see a big drop. You can hasten the release of excess fluid by spending a day or two eating nothing but protein, vegetables and berries or apples. Also, be sure you are drinking your water!

Sugar, starch, salt and alcohol are the usual culprits at causing water gain. Sometimes, people will have food sensitivities to certain foods (even good "diet foods") that cause them to retain water (sort of like an allergy).

2. If you have not been exercising, then adding some activity to your daily schedule is the fastest way to get your metabolism kickstarted. If you are already exercising, then you should look for ways to change it or mix it up because your body has become "complacent" with what you have been doing. If you have not been strength training, add some type of weight training to your regimen – or if you have conditioned your body to one type of cardio work, then change it to another or kick it up a notch – anything to change the routine. Your metabolism may require a higher level of exercise if you have had a lot of past conditioning. Decreasing caloric intake (below 900-1000 calories) is probably not the answer because it may just lower your metabolism and not be productive. Increasing exercise, on the other hand, increases metabolic rate in addition to burning calories during the exercise.

3. Change up what you have been eating. Oftentimes, when dieting, you get stuck in a rut in the food choices to help keep you on track (we all have our favorites and will tend to go to them regularly for both convenience and desirability.) Sometimes, just altering the food that you normally eat (for example, if you have been eating carrots and apples everyday, change it to tomatoes and oranges, switch from chicken to fish or turkey, etc.) will get your body's metabolism going again to burn more calories. Again, the body gets used to what you have been eating and changing out what it has been used to (provided you are making smart, healthy choices) will often get it going again.

4. To paraphrase the old proverb about a "watched pot", "A watched scale never budges." Sometimes weight seems to be stuck for a short while and then starts moving again. Just like a basketball player in a free throw shooting slump, focusing on yesterday's "failure" just maintains the problem. So, keep your focus on "doing the right thing" and the right door will open up. It is not uncommon for me to see patients in my office hit a 2-3 week plateau and then start losing at a good rate again...without seeming to change anything. This is a marathon, not a sprint! It is commitment and persistence that win in the long run!