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My "No Diet" Diet

WebMD Feature from "Marie Claire" Magazine

By Yael Kohen

What would happen if you stopped dieting? If you ate the steak — and the frites — because you wanted them? Yael Kohen discovered that eating what you want isn't as easy as you think.

It was the diet to end all diets. About a year ago — 15 years after my first diet — I decided to break my perpetual shed-pounds lifestyle to do something radical: eat what I wanted, when I wanted. Call it the "no diet" diet. It's the I ever did.

See, the first time I went on a diet, I was 12. I was hardly plump, but there was no hiding my two stomach rolls in Betsey Johnson spaghetti-strap dress I bought for my bat mitzvah. And on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where dieting is as much a rite of passage as your first period.

Through my teens and into my 20s, I went on and off a variety of diets, from Weight Watchers to Atkins to Cabbage until finally seeing a nutritionist I couldn't afford who had me eat four meals a day and diligently record each morning journal. I hit the treadmill because it supposedly burned more calories than the bike. All this, and I was never really years out of college, I was just 3 pounds shy of fitting into the Citizens of Humanity jeans I deliberately bought or small. But those 3 damn pounds wouldn't come off.

Oh, I tried. I ate salads and fruit, skinless chicken and broccoli. I craved the pancakes but ordered egg whites and drink my vodka on the rocks. Except, of course, for all those times I didn't. The problem is, I love food: the smell, experience of sitting down to a three-hour dinner with a bottle of cabernet and close friends. I love Italian peasan dipped in olive oil and a little sea salt; I love braised lamb shank over roasted fingerling potatoes; and I love, love chocolate cake. So when I say I tried, I really did, following all those meals with calorie restriction and exercise, whether the gourmet food had been worth it.

Until one day, several years into this crime-and-punishment back-and-forth, I heard a very skinny friend call herself fat, I wondered when, if ever, I would be satisfied with the way I looked.

That's when I said to hell with it and resolved to live guilt-free and eat what I wanted, when I wanted. I'd seen other people do it, and they were trim. But still, I knew I would need guidelines so I wouldn't revert to my deprivation ways — or go

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First, I had to sit down to a meal on a plate at a table. Second, I had to take small bites and chew thoroughly to taste what it's like to eat slowly — and also learn to stop when I was full. Finally, I'd quit weighing myself. I shouldn't look at the scale if I'm not supposed to care.

Simple enough, right? Wrong.

Before I could actually enjoy a meal, I had to unlearn more than a decade of weight-loss brainwashing. I had to treat turkey, avocado, and bread as a delicious sandwich instead of nutritional parts to be worked off later. I had to rediscover how much I could even eat, since up to now, my intake was either "strict" or "cheating."

The first time I tried this at dinner with friends, I ordered a salad with goat cheese and dressing that I ate with bre medium-rare steak, a glass of cabernet, and finally, oozing chocolate cake. It's not that I'd never ordered that wa just this time, I didn't allow myself to feel bad about it. It was liberating — that night, anyway.

The next day, I passed on the after-lunch brownie I was offered, unsure of the damage I'd done the night before. remembered I was missing my own point. I went back for the brownie and fought the urge to feel bad the rest of the third day, I freaked out. Suddenly, my jeans were tighter, so I spent the next few days eating egg whites, fish vegetables (no carbs!) and working out — until I got the nerve to step on the scale and saw that I hadn't doubled weight (and remembered that my jeans had just come out of the wash). I snapped out of it — that time. But I'd re cycle for six months.

Determined to leave food guilt in the past, I tried an experiment. I would weigh myself every morning for two mor how each day's intake affected my weight. Maybe one indulgent meal — or six — didn't ultimately make a differe enlightening: When I ate Chinese, it was 2 pounds up. When I drank a lot of water, it was 1 pound down. If I ate type meals in a row, the scale jumped 3 pounds. But once my life went back to normal, the scale rebalanced. Ma nothing happened — even after three cookies and a piece of rugelach.

Success.

Along the way, I learned how I eat. I discovered I really did like richer Häagen-Dazs better than the pseudo ice c eating for a decade. But I also learned that when I ordered Chinese chicken with string beans, I preferred brown white. And I actually do love steamed broccoli with sea salt. As for pancakes, a bite is enough. I prefer the savor

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It took me a year, but I've finally become that girl-who-can-eat-whatever-she-wants-and-never-gain-an-ounce — even need to think about my rules. Instead of writing a food log, I spend more time writing in my journal and doin things, like running or rock climbing. And, of course, once I shed the desperation and guilt, I dropped those 3 po

Originally published on: March 25, 2008

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