



Find out the reasons you're struggling to peel off the pounds. Plus, natural solutions that can help.

## Can't lose the weight?

**y**

**ou can almost** hear a collective sigh each morning, as dieters across the U.S. step onto their scales and discover that, in spite of their best efforts, the weight isn't going anywhere. They're following the conventional wisdom—eating right and exercising—but the pounds are staying put. In fact, according to a Pennsylvania State College of Medicine analysis of 14,000 adults, just 1 in 6 dieters succeeds at losing 10 percent or more of his or her body weight and keeps it off for at least a year.

Why is it so hard? "Because it's about a lot more than calories in and calories out," says Pamela Wartian Smith, M.D., co-director of the master's program in medical sciences at the University of South Florida College of Medicine and author of *Why You Can't Lose Weight* (Square One Publishers). Indeed, additional culprits—from food sensitivities to stress levels—can sabotage even the best weight-loss efforts. Of course diet and exercise play a crucial role, but if those strategies aren't working, consider the possible saboteurs that follow and take the recommended steps to combat them. »

### You're sensitive >>

Several recent studies suggest a connection between childhood obesity and food allergies. Which comes first remains a matter of debate, but a few small trials suggest that identifying and eliminating food sensitivities before dieting can set a weight-loss program off on the right foot. "When you eat things to which you're sensitive or intolerant, you get an increase of epinephrine and norepinephrine, so you literally get a high," says Smith, who explains that this reaction can result in cravings for the very foods we should avoid. Food sensitivities may also lead to inflammation and water retention. To compound the problem, over-the-counter antihistamines bolster appetite and dull energy, studies show.

**Try:** An elimination diet: Start by ditching all of the suspected culprits (dairy, gluten, peanuts and soy are common) for three weeks and add them back one by one. "During this phase you should not be focusing on weight loss, but on identifying

Eating Brazil nuts helps with proper thyroid gland function.



the foods that are a problem for you," says Natasha Turner, N.D., a naturopathic doctor in Toronto and author of *The Hormone Diet* (Rodale). If medication for seasonal allergies is boosting your appetite, try natural antihistamines like the flavonoid quercetin, vitamin C or the herb butterbur.


### You're stressed out and exhausted >>

Chronic stress prompts a surge in the "fight or flight" hormone cortisol, which can tear down muscle fiber, impair blood sugar metabolism and boost the brain chemical neuropeptide Y, which sparks cravings, says Smith. Meanwhile, losing just an hour of sleep each night for three days can prompt a surge in the hormone ghrelin, which stimulates appetite, and a slump in the hormone leptin, which tells us when we're full, says Norfolk, Va.-based clinical psychologist Michael Breus, Ph.D., author of *The Sleep Doctor's Diet Plan* (Rodale). Deep sleep, on the other hand, fuels production of the fat-burning human growth hormone (HGH).

**Try:** Meditating for 10 to 30 minutes a day to help normalize cortisol levels and boost levels of the appetite-suppressing hormone serotonin. To relax your body and keep your digestive system cleansed, try 250 milligrams of magnesium daily. Or take 500 to 1,000 milligrams of gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA) an hour before bed. While studies are scarce, some animal trials and small human trials have shown the amino acid to both ease anxiety and promote fat loss.

### Your thyroid is sluggish >>

Turner estimates that nearly one-third of all men and women have a thyroid that is operating in a suboptimal range, often brought on by stress, a genetic predisposition, working out more than an hour a day, or restricting calories too much (less than 1,700 a day for women; 2,000 for men). "The thyroid affects the metabolism of every single cell in the body," Turner says. "You can diet until you are blue in the face, but if your



Food sensitivities can make your body bloated.

thyroid is out of whack, you will not lose weight." Telltale signs of a sluggish thyroid include eyebrow thinning, constipation, weight gain, dry skin and irregular periods.

**Try:** Having your thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) levels tested. While 0.4 to 4 ml/UL is considered "normal," a value higher than 2 can slow metabolism and hinder weight loss. Consider taking the herb ashwagandha (believed to jump-start production of thyroid hormones T3 and T4). Also, eat a few Brazil nuts every day (they're rich in the mineral selenium, which is key for proper thyroid gland function).

### You've hit a hormonal rut >>

According to a 2011 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, restricting calories and losing body fat can wreak havoc on insulin, leptin, ghrelin and other hormones, prompting a surge in hunger and a slump in metabolism. This typically occurs about 10 weeks into a weight-loss program and can last for more than a year, even after the diet is abandoned. Dieting also prompts dopamine levels to fall, squelching motivation.

**Try:** Indulging in one higher carbohydrate "cheat meal" per week to bolster your leptin levels, suggests Turner. Taking a daily omega-3 supplement can also raise leptin levels and promote satiety. Also, make sure you're mixing up the intensity and even the time of day that you're breaking a sweat. You can also try balancing insulin with 300 milligrams daily of alpha lipoic acid. To boost motivating dopamine, take 1,000 milligrams daily of L-tyrosine (which also bolsters thyroid function). Or, have more sex (also known to elevate dopamine levels!). ✕

**Lisa Marshall** is a writer in Boulder, Colo.