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How to Make Your Metabolism Work for You, No Matter Your Age

Diets aren't the only way to give your metabolism a boost.

By [Marygrace Taylor](#) Oct 26, 2021

Here's what you've probably been told about your metabolism: In your 30s, your once speedy metabolism gradually hits the brakes. And then as the years pass, it's common for the scale to creep up and our jeans to get tighter or stop fitting altogether. So naturally, you might feel pressured to spend more time at the gym and rethink your [diet](#) in an attempt to fight back. The idea that our metabolism is an uphill battle that only gets harder with time has been ingrained in us from an early age.

But none of that is exactly true, recent research says.

Experts long thought that metabolism—the process by which the body converts food into energy, according to the [Mayo Clinic](#)—progressively slows during a person's 30s, 40s, 50s, and beyond, resulting in near-inevitable weight gain. But now, landmark research published in the journal *Science* has shown that's not the case after all. Our metabolisms actually hold steady from ages 20 to 60, found a 40-year study of some 6,500 males and females aged 8 days to 95 years. And while calorie-burning does start to slow after age 60, the change is subtle, happening at a rate of just 7% per decade. (For instance, a body burning around 1,400 calories per day at age 60 would burn around 1,300 calories per day by age 70.)

That might come as a welcome surprise—when it comes to sticking to a healthy weight, your body *isn't* working against your efforts after all! Except...as anyone who's ever looked back at pictures of themselves from their carefree 20s knows, age-related weight gain *does* still happen. The average American adult puts on 1 to 2 pounds per year through age 55, JAMA findings show. But our aging bodies aren't really the culprit. It's the way our habits tend to change with age, which makes it easier to add fat, says metabolism researcher Herman Pontzer, Ph.D., co-author of the *Science* study and author of Burn.

In other words? Your metabolism isn't slowing down with each passing birthday like you might have thought. As we get older, we just tend to eat more and move less. Steering clear of that trap—and supporting your body's inherent calorie-burning ability at any age—is simply a matter of reigning those less-than-healthy habits back. In doing so, you'll keep excess calories from creeping in and causing your weight to creep up. Here, explore five science-backed strategies you can start on today.

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1. Eat more mindfully

While there is no magic food that will *change* our metabolism, the foods we eat play a role in how our bodies function. We all know it's incredibly easy to get into the habit of grabbing tasty snack foods just because it's fun, and hey! They're there. But most of us aren't actually hungry when we're eating on autopilot, and those extra bites can easily add up to overeating and weight gain, Pontzer says. In fact, distracted eating causes people to take in around 10% more calories in the moment—and up to 25% more calories at later meals, concluded an *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* review.

That doesn't mean you have to cut out your favorite snack foods (or any foods!) completely. It just means you need to be more intentional about how you eat them. "It's more about focusing on why you're eating instead of what you're eating," says explains Susan Albers, Psy.D., mindful eating expert and author of *Hanger Management*. "Once you shift towards more mindful eating habits, it can be a needle-mover for your weight."

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That can be as simple as checking in with your body to see if you're actually hungry before taking a bite of something. If you *are* hungry, great! Sit down, put your phone away, and enjoy yourself. If not, go do something else (take a walk! Call a friend!). When your stomach starts rumbling later, the food will still be there.

2. Choose foods that *really* fill you up

Picking foods that keep you fuller longer is important for keeping your weight in check too, Pontzer explains. When you finish a meal or snack feeling satisfied, you're less likely to come back for more just a short while later.

So what belongs on the menu, at least most of the time? Foods rich in protein, fiber, and healthy fat should be your mainstay. To understand why, picture your metabolism and digestion as a fire that needs to be fed in a way to keep it burning efficiently, says Seattle-based nutrition expert Liz Wysonick, M.S., R.D.N. "Meals that contain protein, fiber, and healthy fat can be thought of as fire-friendly fuel logs that will feed and sustain your fire's burning capacity because they're digested at a slow, steady rate," she says.

Foods containing mostly refined carbohydrates or sugar like white bread, white pasta, or baked goods aren't as helpful and might even have the opposite effect. Because they're digested rapidly, they cause the body's blood sugar to quickly spike and drop, which can leave you feeling hungry again shortly after you eat.

It's fine to enjoy a cookie or a muffin every once in a while, of course. But increasingly, evidence shows that consuming too many foods high in refined carbs may actually affect the body's blood sugar levels in a way that tricks the brain into thinking the body is fasting. That, in turn, prompts the body to store the carby calories as fat—while encouraging you to eat even more, suggests a recent article published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

The fix? Make your meals more filling by choosing fiber-rich whole grains like brown rice or whole wheat pasta over their refined counterparts and pairing them with a protein (like beans or fish), a healthy fat (like olive oil or avocado), and a serving of veggies or fruit. For snacks, "think produce plus protein," Wysonick recommends. Greek yogurt with berries, hummus and crudite, or apple slices with peanut butter all fit the bill. And save those sugary treats for once in a while (think once or twice a week instead of every day).

3. Work your muscles

Regular resistance training is the best way to preserve and build lean muscle tissue, which allows your body more calories throughout the day compared to fat tissue. "Muscle mass is the number one predictor of metabolic rate," says Lara Dugas, Ph.D., who studies exercise physiology and metabolism at Loyola University Chicago. "The longer you can preserve your muscle mass, the longer you can preserve your metabolic rate."

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Case in point? A study that followed men and women with in-range BMIs who engage in one to two hours of resistance training per week were 30% less likely to become obese over nearly two decades, found a [PLoS Medicine](#) study. That amount roughly lines up with the CDC's recommendation to engage in strengthening activities that work all of the major muscle groups at least twice a week.

Even though the *Science* study shows that calorie-burning doesn't start to decline until we're in our 60s, you'll reap more benefits when you start pumping iron during early- or middle-adulthood. After 60, it's tough for the body to build back muscle that's already been lost. "It's easier to maintain what you've got than to build it back up," explains Dugas.

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4. Get your cardio, but don't overdo it

Regular aerobic exercise increases your total calorie burn for the day, which can help you keep your weight in check when paying attention to your diet in tandem. In fact, [research shows](#) that physical activity combined with an overall healthy eating plan can make you much more likely to achieve a healthy weight compared to just changing your diet or exercising alone.

Aim to get the recommended 30 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise at least five days a week (or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise over the course of the week), but don't stress about trying to do more for the sake of the scale, says Dugas. While it's perfectly fine to get extra exercise if you enjoy being active, going above and beyond 150 minutes of physical activity per week doesn't seem to contribute to weight maintenance or weight loss over the long term, concluded an [American Diabetes Association](#) review. Why? [Studies suggest](#) that exercising more may simply drive you to compensate by eating more, basically leaving you right where you started. (Running for an hour makes you hungry!)

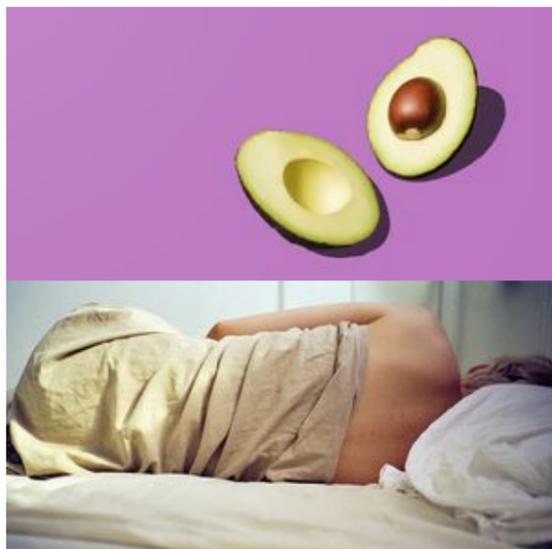
Moderate aerobic activities like walking, cycling, or jogging are fine places to start. If you want to get more vigorous, Dugas recommends working up to high-intensity interval training (HIIT). It boosts calorie-burning for a longer period after exercise is over, "so it's very, very good for weight loss," she says.

Outside of your planned sweat sessions, make the effort to sit less, stand more, and get more little bits of movement throughout the day. Long periods of sitting cause the body to burn fewer total daily calories, [even among routine exercisers](#). On the other hand, taking frequent walking or standing breaks, pacing, or even fidgeting can encourage your body to burn extra little bits of energy all day long, concluded one [Mayo Clinic Proceedings](#) review.

5. Manage your stress and get enough sleep

To really support your body's ability to burn calories effectively, it's wise to think about your life in a holistic way—that is, beyond eating and workout out. Too much stress and not enough sleep can wreak havoc on your ability to make healthy choices. Both stress and exhaustion can ramp up your appetite cravings for sugary foods and zap your motivation to be active, and over time, contribute to weight gain, concluded a 2018 analysis published in the journal [Obesity Reviews](#).

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For that, you can thank the stress hormone cortisol, which rises when we're frazzled or sleep-deprived (or both), notes Thomas Bradley Raper, M.D., a sleep medicine physician with [Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas](#). A hard day or night of bad sleep won't pack on the pounds, of course. But over time, ongoing stressors can cause cortisol levels to get "stuck" on high, potentially setting the stage for weight gain, according to [Harvard Medical School](#).

The path to calm can look different for different people, of course. But in general, taking breaks when you feel overwhelmed, making regular time to do things you enjoy, and even taking time away from your phone or devices can all play roles in taming the tension, notes the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). And once you make your way into a more relaxed state, you might find that getting the recommended seven to eight hours of sleep per night—and making healthier choices during the day—comes a little easier.

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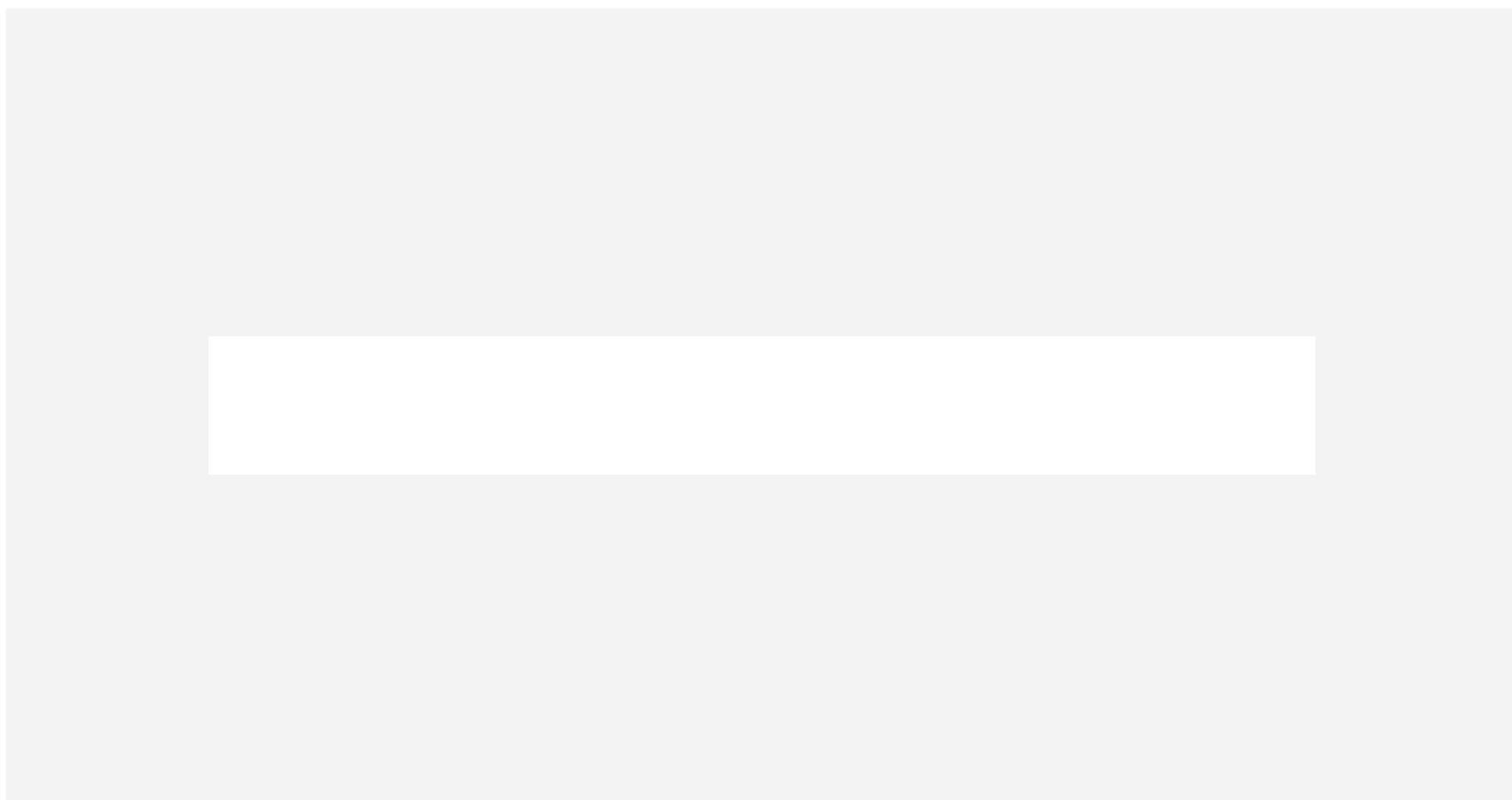
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