

When to Stop Losing and Start Maintaining

When should you stop dieting and start rest-of-your-life eating? That is not an easy question to answer. It is not just a matter of getting down to a predetermined goal you have set for yourself because that weight might or might not be realistic for you to achieve or to maintain. It's important to ask yourself the following questions:

- 1. What would you like to weigh?**
(in other words, what is your ideal goal?)
- 2. What weight could make you at least minimally satisfied?**
(in other words, what is your satisfaction goal?)

It's always a good sign when the numbers are not identical. It means that you are probably more realistic about what you can accomplish.

For example, Jean, who started at 12 stone, told me that her ideal goal was 8 Stone 7 pounds and that her satisfaction goal was 9 stone. She actually has maintained her weight for more than 10 years at 8 stone 12 pounds (plus or minus 2 pounds) – quite happily. On the other hand, Carrie, who started at 9 ½ stone, said she ideally wanted to get down to 8 stone but would be satisfied with 8 stone 4 pound. She was initially disappointed when I told her we wouldn't know for a while whether her range was realistic or not. In fact, she was able to get down to 8 stone 5 pounds and has maintained at about 8 stone 7 pounds for five years. It took her a while to accept this as her reasonable maintenance weight.

So how do you know when you have reached maintenance? How can you determine a realistic maintenance weight? You will find a formula in the following pages. But, First, you need to understand the difference between your Lowest Achievable Weight and your Lowest Maintainable Weight.

Your Lowest Achievable Weight Versus Your Lowest Maintainable Weight

Let's say you have been slowly losing weight while eating a fairly consistent number of calories each day and getting about the same amount of exercise each week. At some point, your weight will naturally plateau, even though you are not doing anything differently. If your weight remains constant for several weeks, you will have to make a decision. You can continue as is and see what happens: or, if it is reasonable to do so, you can cut your food intake by about 200 calories a day (if your health-care professional agrees) or increase your exercise and see what happens. At some point, though, you will stop losing weight and it will no longer be sensible for you to decrease your caloric intake or to increase your exercise. You have reached your Lowest Achievable Weight.

Your **LOWEST ACHIEVABLE WEIGHT** is the weight at which you naturally plateau.

You might not be able to stay at your Lowest Achievable Weight, however, because to do so you would have to keep on eating the same number of calories and exercising to the same degree for the rest of your life. In fact, at some point, you will stop losing weight and it will no longer be sensible for you to decrease your caloric intake or to increase your exercise. As you age, your metabolism will slow, and you will have to decrease your caloric intake or increase your energy output even more to maintain that weight. It just might not be reasonable to expect yourself to stay at your Lowest Achievable Weight forever.

Instead, you should consider raising your number of calories modestly or decreasing your exercise (if you feel you are overdoing it in order to maintain your Lowest Achievable Weight) to a level you can more easily adhere to. Your weight will probably go up a little, but it will plateau again at your Lowest Maintainable Weight.

Your **LOWEST MAINTAINABLE WEIGHT** is the weight you can sustain permanently, while still following a sensible eating and exercise program for the rest of your life.

Your Lowest Maintainable Weight might not be the lowest weight you have ever been in your adult life. Maybe you weighed significantly less at some point because your lifestyle was different, you were much more physically active, you had been

sick, or you were younger and had a higher metabolism. Even if you could achieve this weight again, you most likely would not be able to maintain this weight.

Your Lowest Maintainable Weight also is probably not the weight of your thinnest friend, family member, neighbour, co-worker or person you see at the gym. And it almost certainly is not the weight of celebrities or fashion models, who eat an incredibly (usually quite unhealthy) low numbers of calories a day and spend hours and hours exercising.

Determine Your Lowest Achievable Weight

When your weight plateaus for a month or two, think about your caloric intake. Ask yourself:

- Do I want to reduce my calories even more?
- Will I get enough satisfaction from eating if I eat less?
- Will eating even less still be healthy?
- Will eating less fit into my lifestyle?
- Could I comfortably live with a reduced number of calories for the long term?

If you answered yes to all these questions, then cut your calories modestly (by about 200 calories a day) and see if you lose weight.

You can also think about exercising more. Ask yourself:

- Do I really want to increase the frequency, intensity, or duration of my exercise?
- Will I have enough extra time and energy to devote to more exercise?
- Will exercising more be healthy for me – or will I be overdoing it?
- Will I easily be able to keep up an increased level of exercise for the long term?

If you answered yes to all those questions, then increase your exercise modestly and see what happens.

If you lose more weight by eating less or exercising more, fine. Keep up with your new routine until you reach a new plateau and reassess the situation.

Determine Your Lowest Maintainable Weight

Let's say that you have plateaued at your Lowest Achievable Weight for several weeks or months. Then you realise that the strict eating and exercise routine you have been following to stay there is too much of a struggle. Maybe you feel hungry or deprived too frequently. Maybe you would like to be able to eat out more or drink wine with dinner. Maybe you have less control over your eating schedule or choice of foods. Maybe your lifestyle has changed, and you simply cannot devote as much time and energy to food preparation or exercise. It's not that you are less motivated, there really are obstacles in your way.

At this point, make a decision to eat a little bit more or decide to exercise a little less. You need an eating and exercise plan you can comfortably live with for the rest of your life. Rather than drifting into changes in your routines, sit down and write a new plan. How many extra calories do you want to consume per day or per week? How much do you need to cut back on exercise?

Follow this plan for several months, revising it as needed. You will gain a few pounds and plateau again. **This is your Lowest Maintainable Weight.** You may find that this initial Lowest Maintainable Weight works well for several years. As your metabolism slows with age, you might need to reset your Lowest Maintainable Weight. The weight that you maintain at one age may or may not be a reasonable weight to maintain 10 years later. Do not allow yourself to just drift to a higher weight though. When you gain, make sure it is not because you have become lax in your eating habits or exercise routine. If you want to be able to eat the same amount or if you want to be able to eat a little more, set a new Lowest Maintainable Weight, a weight you will not let yourself go beyond.

Case Study:

When Ger, a teacher, plateaued for several weeks at 10 ½ stone, she wanted to keep losing. She thought she would be able to cut her calories and exercise more. But when we analysed her situation, it became apparent that she could do so only for a couple of months, during her summer off from teaching. When she returned to school in September, she knew she would have less control over her schedule and food. She reluctantly agreed that it didn't make sense to try to lose a few more pounds, since she would likely regain them within a short period of time.