

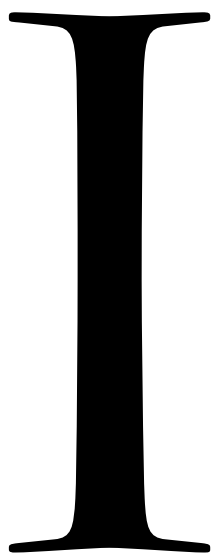
A close-up photograph of several round cookies with pink frosting. Each cookie is decorated with white icing swirls and small chocolate chips. The cookies are arranged on a gold-colored, textured doily. The title 'Big Fat Lies' is overlaid in large white text on the top left.

Big Fat Lies

Diet advice has, for decades, relied on gimmicks that promote easy, painless—and fictitious—weight loss. Now, new strategies are based on hard truths and real results.

By Ginny Graves





In her lifelong quest to slim down, Mara Schiavocampo, an Emmy Award-winning journalist, swallowed everything from get-thin-quick shakes to diet pills. At one point, she even joined a food support group that forbade peas and corn and required permission from “sponsors” to eat anything at all. Nothing worked. But what she didn’t lose in pounds over 23 years of unsuccessful dieting, she gained in wisdom. And the insights she shares in *Thinspired: How I Lost 90 Pounds—My Plan for Lasting Weight Loss and Self-Acceptance* (Gallery Books/Karen Hunter Publishing) carry the refreshing aura of been-there-tried-that truth. Having lost 90 pounds slowly over two years and kept them off for more than a year, she says, “If you want to lose weight, you have to eat fewer calories, full stop. If you’re still not losing weight, eat even less. The diet industry has tried to make it sound like you can tweak your lifestyle and—voilà—you’re thin. Well, guess what? You can’t.”

Just 25 percent of people who have lost weight are successful at keeping it off for five years or more, according to one survey—and new research is starting to explain why. The insights dovetail with Schiavocampo’s: “It requires sacrifice, and it’s gonna hurt.”

You can’t lose weight without feeling hungry. If the world were fair, our appetite would shrink when our dress size does. But our bodies, which evolved to survive in lean times, were designed to keep weight *on*, and they developed some wily methods for blocking weight loss. Take leptin, a hormone whose major function is to maintain our usual body weight by signaling when our energy stores—also known as fat—are too low. It’s produced by fat cells, so as you slim down, levels drop. “As you lose weight, you’re hungrier than before, you have to eat more to feel full, and your brain responds to food differently, so you have an increased drive to eat and decreased levels of restraint,” says Michael Rosenbaum, a researcher in body-weight regulation and a

professor of pediatrics and medicine at Columbia University Medical Center. While leptin-based drugs may one day help circumvent the problem, for now we’re left to try to trick the body into feeling full. The best methods: Eat protein with every meal, and snack on high-volume, low-calorie foods. Barbara Rolls, a professor and the chair of nutritional sciences at Penn State University and author of *The Ultimate Volumetrics Diet* (Morrow Cookbooks), calls these “low-energy-density” foods. “Our studies show that you can eat up to a pound a day more food and still lose weight if you choose things that are low in energy density and water-rich,” she says. The most appealing foods on that list: broth-based soups, vegetables, beans, fish, and most fruit.

You may have to give up some really delicious food entirely.

A few bites of a muffin or gelato feel so innocent, so manageable. But when you’re in weight-loss mode, stopping eating (never easy) is harder than ever. While leptin drops when you diet (and cravings intensify), levels of ghrelin—nicknamed the hunger hormone—soar, triggering not just the appetite but also a powerful drive for high-fat, sugary snacks, says David E. Cummings, a leading ghrelin researcher and a professor of medicine at the University of Washington in Seattle. The self-defeating result: If you have one Oreo, you might not stop till the empty bag (and possibly your morale) is crumpled in the trash. “Our bodies have developed a very powerful evolutionary system honed to defeat weight loss, and one result is the urge to eat these highly palatable, highly caloric foods,” he says. Some research shows that ghrelin acts on the brain’s reward and pleasure centers, the same areas activated by drugs and sex, which may make avoiding binge-friendly foods easier than having a chaste bite or two. Schiavocampo gave up candy, dairy, flour, and wine on her way to a size 6—a challenge she says was “excruciating. But going cold turkey is easier than trying to stop once I start.”

You’re a poor judge of how much you eat.

Who hasn’t sworn to themselves that their diet was unimpeachable for days—then stepped on the scale to a nasty shock? When it comes to diet, self-deception is rampant. For instance, researchers from the University of South Carolina recently reviewed the accuracy of the self-reported calorie intakes in National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey research conducted from 1971 to 2010 and came to an alarming conclusion: Nearly 70 percent of the 34,000-plus female participants reported eating so little that their consumption was “not physiologically plausible.” As in they couldn’t survive on so little food. (Almost 60 percent of men seriously underestimated their intake.) “The reasons people under-report aren’t completely understood; there’s some evidence they don’t want to admit how much they’re eating, but many genuinely don’t realize how many calories they’re taking in,”

**Vigorous exercise, in some cases,
can leave you so depleted, you move far less
for the rest of the day.**

says Andrew Brown, a scientist at the University of Alabama's Nutrition Obesity Research Center. In studies with colleagues, he's found little evidence that eating more fruits and vegetables reliably leads to weight loss, results that are puzzling until you understand what they mean: Many (maybe most) people merely add salads and vegetables to their regular diets instead of substituting those foods for, say, rice. Brown adds, "If you're serious about losing weight, you need to get real about how much you're consuming—either by counting calories or keeping a food diary."

Exercise alone won't make you slim. "It's frustrating but true: If you just exercise and don't change your diet, you may have a modest weight loss of only a few pounds," says John M. Jakicic, the director of the Physical Activity and Weight Management Research Center at the University of

You can't add enough muscle to boost your metabolism permanently. "It's very hard for most women to bulk up enough to make a significant difference in their metabolism," says David Nieman, a professor of health and exercise science at Appalachian State University's research campus in Kannapolis, North Carolina. Do two sets of eight to ten strengthening exercises three days a week for several months and you'll be lucky to add two to three pounds of muscle, for a total extra daily burn of up to 36 calories. That's nine baby carrots.

Once you lose it, you're not home free. Sixty percent of people who lose weight regain it, not because they're weak or unmotivated, but because maintenance is harder than losing: "Those who weigh 120 pounds without dieting don't have to work that hard to stay there,"



Pittsburgh. "That's because most of us unknowingly compensate for the calories we burn by eating more." It's surprisingly easy to do: If a five-foot-four, 135-pound woman walks four miles in one hour (a respectably brisk, late-for-the-train pace), she burns 317 calories—just 27 calories more than a grande mocha at Starbucks. High-incineration sessions, like SoulCycle (Schiavocampo's favorite) and Barry's Bootcamp (she loves that, too), create a greater calorie deficit and, as a result, contribute more to your overall efforts, but even those hard-core workouts might not have as much impact as you'd think. Studies show that in some cases, vigorous exercise can leave you so depleted, you actually move far less for the rest of the day than you would normally, says Jakicic, who puts it into perspective this way: "You should absolutely exercise—at least 30 to 40 minutes most days—because it's good for your health and burns calories. But you need to focus your weight-loss efforts on eating less."

says Rosenbaum. "But people who used to weigh 160 pounds and now weigh 120 burn fewer calories—on average about 350 a day less—so they have to eat less and exercise more." Yes, it sucks. But long-term success is possible, and proof lies in the National Weight Control Registry (NWCR), a database of people who've kept off 30-plus pounds for at least one year. Successful losers exercise an average of an hour a day, says James Hill, a cofounder of the NWCR. They adopt strategies to keep themselves on track, whether it's counting calories or weighing themselves daily. "And not having cheat days appears to be important," says Victoria A. Catenacci, an assistant professor of endocrinology, metabolism, and diabetes at the University of Colorado Denver. Find a way to eat and exercise that you can stick with for the long run. And don't give up. "Most people in the NWCR failed many, many times before they finally were successful," says Hill. "In my mind, they're heroes." ♦