

Why it's OK to cheat on your diet

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Credit: Florida International University

How are you doing on that New Year's resolution to lose weight? Have you given in to temptation and strayed from your healthy diet? Don't fret. This is one case in which the experts say it's not only okay if you cheat, it's actually beneficial.

"Behavior is one of the hardest to change. Change is never easy and drastic change is even harder. So baby steps is best advised," says Dr. Eneida Roldan, CEO of FIU Health and a board-certified specialist in obesity.

Flexibility is key to reaching goals

For more than a decade, Roldan ran her own private weight management practice and routinely gave patients "permission" to cheat on their diets.

"A day of cheating didn't cause 50 pounds of weight gain in a year," Roldan would tell her patients. "Giving them permission to cheat is a way to motivate and reward their willingness to make a change, and, eventually, it becomes part of their behavior DNA."

A recent research study from Wharton School marketing professor Marissa Sharif suggests that kind of flexibility is the key to reaching goals. In other words, including cheat days, which Sharif calls "emergency reserves", help people stay on track whether they are trying to lose weight or quit smoking. "Sometimes incorporating flexibility in goals can help people perform better in the long run," Sharif says.

The research did not attempt to determine how much cheating is acceptable. But Roldan says, as with most things, it's all about moderation – which is why she warns that crash diets can be dangerous and counterproductive.

"Many people go on drastic diets after the holidays, or before the summer when they want to fit into a new swimsuit or when they have a special event coming up and want to look their best," Roldan says. "But extreme diets are an extremely bad idea."

Extreme diets can be hazardous to your health

Although you may feel good about your quick weigh loss, in the end, drastic dieting will take its toll physically and psychologically.

Physically, Roldan warns extreme diets can cause dehydration; the brain could be affected and thinking can become foggy. Changes in the heart can result in potential loss of muscle mass, and then there is something called metabolic rebound where the body stops losing weight even when we're not eating that many calories. This also causes a drastic weight gain as calories increase.

Psychologically, she says, emotions could come into disarray caused by metabolic changes in hormones that will increase stress and depression. This can ultimately result in binge eating and feelings of guilt.

Instead of risky quick [weight](#) loss programs, Roldan recommends you make a commitment to change your life style and accept that's it's okay to take [baby steps](#) that will gradually get you to your goal without compromising your health.

Provided by Florida International University

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