

# Chapter 1

## Why a Calorie Is Not a Calorie

One of the guys said to the other, “What I don’t understand is how a girl can eat a one-pound box of candy and gain 10 pounds.”

— *The Daily Californian*

The novelist Vladimir Nabokov coined the term *doughnut truth* to mean *only the truth, and the whole truth, with a hole in the truth*. This is a good description of what we have been told about weight loss by experts. What they’ve said isn’t wrong, exactly, but it is seriously incomplete -- and the missing information is very important if you want to lose weight easily and comfortably. The Shangri-La diet allows you to do that because it’s based on the whole truth — including the previously left-out “hole.”

You’ve probably heard the phrase *A calorie is a calorie*. Doctors say it to patients. Weight-loss experts say it to journalists. *A calorie is a calorie* is meant to convey the common belief that the only way to lose weight is to eat fewer calories than you burn. (A food’s calorie value indicates how much energy you extract when you digest it. Like the mileage ratings of new cars, the calorie values of foods are measured under unrealistic conditions — but, like those mileage ratings, they’re good for comparisons.) According to this idea, if a particular diet was successful it’s because you ate fewer calories. The calorie-is-a-calorie experts say that in order to lose weight you must put down your fork. Do whatever it takes to eat less. “Everything should be about portion size,” said Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition at New York University, in a radio interview. Anyone who says otherwise, they imply, who says that two foods with the same number of calories may have very different effects on your weight—well, that person is . . . confused.

It is true that in order to lose weight you must eat less or become more active—but it is *not* true that this has to be difficult. It is not even true that to lose weight you must *try* to eat less. In fact, you can lose weight by eating *more* of certain foods—and this book explains how. You will *add* foods to your diet and

you won't have to stop eating anything. Unless you want to lose a large amount of weight (say, 60 pounds or more), you may not even need to make big changes in which foods you eat.

The Shangri-La diet is so different from previous diets and what you have been told about weight loss because it is based on a new theory of weight control, a theory supported by considerable scientific evidence.

### **More Is Easier than Less**

Early weight-loss diets demanded that you *subtract*: Cut calories by eating less. This prescription worked so rarely (everyone became too hungry!) that the message had to change. It became *Eat less fat*. Cut out the ice cream, butter, French fries, hamburgers and other high-fat foods, experts said, and the unwanted pounds will come off. This advice didn't work very well either.

The message became *Eat fewer carbs*. Avoid almost all carbs (Atkins) or avoid "bad" carbs (Protein Power, Sugarbusters, South Beach) we were told, and you'll be healthier and slimmer. Bread, pasta, even apples and bananas were restricted or forbidden. Low-carb diets work modestly well, but they are not easy to follow ("I got tired of chicken and eggs," a friend said) and rarely produce as much weight loss as the dieter would like.

With the Shangri-La diet, weight loss happens because you *add*: You add certain foods to what you eat. These foods make you feel full and satisfied more easily; as a result, you eat less overall and lose weight. The foods you'll be adding are safe, cheap, and widely available. You don't have to give up anything. You don't need to *try* to eat less of anything or to pay close attention to how much you eat.

### **The Truth You Know**

The Shangri-La diet is different from earlier diets because it is based on new ideas. One of them is that what you eat affects your weight in two ways—one that you already know all about, and one that's the missing hole in the whole dieting truth.

What you already know is that excess calories become fat. You've been told many times that your weight depends on how much you eat. If you eat more, you will weigh more. It's true that your body extracts energy (calories) from the food you eat, and if you consume more energy than you use, most of the excess is stored as fat. From this point of view, it is true that a calorie is a calorie: It doesn't matter where the excess energy (calories) came from. It will become fat. As far as fat storage goes, 100 excess calories from raw carrots will have the same effect as 100 excess calories from banana cream pie. It is also true that to lose weight (fat), you must burn more calories than you eat. All this is true — but it is a doughnut truth.

### **The Missing Truth**

Here is what you have not been told: Food *also* affects your weight by influencing what is called your body-weight *set point*, a term taken from engineering. Weight-control researchers have used it to mean the weight your body “wants” to be—the weight you are when you're not paying attention to how much you eat, the weight you drift back to when you go off a diet. Your set point may be quite a bit more than the weight you would choose or the weight that's healthy for you. In spite of the name, however, your set point is not fixed or constant. It is not your “natural weight,” one unchanging magic number. Rather, your set point goes up and down, partly in response to what you eat.

By varying how hungry you are and how soon you feel full when you eat, your body-weight regulatory system pushes your weight close to your set point. Your body-weight set point is like the temperature to which a thermostat is set. My home thermostat, for example, is set to 70 degrees. The system “wants” the temperature to be 70 degrees at all times. If the temperature goes below 70 degrees, the system turns on a heater, which warms the house. When the temperature reaches 70 degrees, the heater turns off. Your weight-regulation system controls your weight in a similar way. Let's say your body-weight set point is 180 pounds. If you weigh *less* than 180 pounds, you will be hungry and think about food. The bigger the gap between your set point and your weight, the more hungry you will be, the more you will think about food, and the more food it will

take to feel full when you eat. It is nearly impossible to weigh much less than your set point for a long time — the hunger becomes unbearable.

If you weigh *more* than your set point of 180 pounds, you will not be hungry and will think much less about food. When you eat, you will feel full rapidly. (See the table for more details.)

What's My Set Point?	
<i>If you feel . . .</i>	<i>Your set point is . . .</i>
Ravenous. Can't stop thinking about food. Dream about it. Nothing fills you up, even a large meal. Unhappy.	Your weight plus several pounds
Hungry. Always feel like eating. Think about food every few minutes.	Your weight plus a pound or two
Comfortable. Hungry sometimes. At mealtime, food looks good. You eat average amounts.	Close to your weight
Full long after a meal. Forget to eat. Don't think about food. Not hungry until you start eating.	Your weight minus a pound or two
Stuffed. Feel like you don't want to eat for days. Your favorite foods? No thanks. Never hungry.	Your weight minus several pounds

The level of your set point depends on everything you have eaten for the last several months. Some foods are high-set-point foods; if you eat only these foods, your set point will be high. Some foods are low-set-point foods; if you eat only those foods, your set point will be low. (I'll explain why in later chapters.) Other foods are in between. Your set point depends on the *average* of what you have eaten for several months. When you eat a food that is low for you (lower than your average), your set point goes down slightly. When you eat a food that is high for you (higher than your average), your set point goes up slightly.

When a food lowers your set point, you will be less hungry than usual afterwards. You may wait longer than usual before your next meal and you will tend to eat less than usual at your next meal. When a food raises your set point, you are more hungry than usual afterwards, you may eat sooner than usual, and

you will tend to eat more than usual at your next meal. The quote from Nancy Mitford's *Love in a Cold Climate* that opens this book ["Curiously enough, the immense dinner of the night before, which ought to have lasted me a week, made me hungrier than usual"] is an example: The dinner of the night before raised the speaker's set point. It made her hungrier than usual at later meals.

By raising or lowering your set point, every food controls how much you eat *later* – how much you eat of *other* foods. By itself, a one-pound box of chocolates can increase your weight by no more than one pound. But if it raises your set point 10 pounds, it will cause you to eat more of *other* foods, enough to raise your weight 10 pounds. Your body always wants your weight to match your set point.

### **Diets and Your Set Point**

Diets are not only about losing weight; they're also about how they make you feel. If you lose weight but feel hungry all the time, the diet is no success—you are very likely to regain the lost weight, sooner or later, in order to stop feeling hungry. This is why simply eating less doesn't work for long—you lose weight, true, but you gain hunger. Your hunger grows and eventually becomes unbearable.

Diets cause hunger when they lower your weight without lowering your set point. *The key to successful weight loss is to lower your set point.* When you lower your set point, you will lose weight without effort.

The Shangri-La diet lowers your set point because you eat *more* of certain foods — zero-set-point foods. These foods are so powerful they will lower your set point no matter where it is. Because your set point will go down, you will feel less hungry than usual, you will eat less than usual, and you will lose weight—without any struggle at all. And without cutting anything out of your diet.

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