



How This Family Doctor Lost 75 Pounds Easily Without Portion Control

By Steve Lawenda
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As a family medicine physician, I treat patients all day long for conditions related to poor nutrition and obesity: diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, acid reflux, sleep apnea, arthritis, and low back pain, to name a few. Yet not so long ago, I too was careening down the very same path to health destruction. I have struggled with my weight my entire life, especially since graduating high school. I'm 6'2" and weighed up to 255 lbs. at my peak, which technically qualified me as obese.

I was especially worried about diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, all of which run rampant in my family. In fact, my father and grandfather both suffered heart attacks at a young age, and my father has also suffered multiple complications of diabetes. Having learned in medical school the importance of genetics, I assumed and feared I was destined for a life of obesity and its complications.

Med School Taught Me Very Little About Nutrition

Unfortunately, with all of my extensive scientific and medical training and education, I was taught very little about nutrition and wellness. I had one class on nutrition, but it didn't prepare me to best help patients with obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. I had to depend mostly on what was taught as the main treatment for these conditions -- medications, procedures, and surgeries. That is unfortunately typical for most physicians.

My Own Ride on the Weight-Loss Roller-Coaster

Left on my own to tackle weight-control challenges for myself and my patients, I knew only two strategies: eating less and/or exercising more. Eating less (aka calorie counting or portion control) repeatedly failed me, leaving me hungry and craving more of my favorite foods. My weight yo-yoed up and down, through several years of intermittent portion control and exercise cycles. Needless to say, I was not alone: statistics show that calorie-restricted diets fail 95% of the time, and my

patients and I only proved that point.

After many years of sporadic weight fluctuation, I gradually gave up trying to lose weight again. I felt in many ways a failure, or at best I rationalized that I was simply genetically destined to be overweight and eventually sick. Never once did I imagine that something as simple as changing *what* I ate, instead of *how much* I ate, could change my life in such profound ways.

A New Possibility: Eating More and Losing Weight

I first learned about the science and logic of a whole-foods, plant-based diet from the book *Eat to Live* by Dr. Joel Fuhrman. Soon after reading it, I watched the inspirational *Forks Over Knives* documentary and later read books from Drs. Caldwell Esselstyn (*Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease*), T. Colin Campbell (*The China Study*), and John McDougall (*The Starch Solution*).

I found the concept (whole, natural plant foods, no portion control) so very logical and appealing that I challenged myself to give it my best shot. This was the first time I had heard of a strategy to lose weight by eating MORE of something (whole plant foods), not less, and where portion control and calorie counting were not only unnecessary, but actually discouraged.

Throughout the journey, it blew my mind that I could eat as much as I wanted, feel full every day (at times even "stuffed"), yet see my weight drop at such a steady pace. I had to pinch myself! How could this be? It seemed to defy some law of physics. It was the best feeling.

Suffice it to say this was one of the best decisions of my life. I lost 75 pounds with relative ease over eight months and have maintained this loss for over a year and a half. I have never been so passionate about health or wellness. I now realize that I wasn't a failure; the food I was eating failed me.

... And I Love the Food!

Initially, I worried that I wouldn't enjoy the food. I loved

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my old comfort foods and didn't think I liked vegetables. Yet when I gave it more thought, I realized that I did enjoy vegetables in soups and salads and found it fairly easy to eat more of these. At the same time, realizing I could not live only on soups and salads, I also came to realize that many of my favorite cuisines, namely Italian, Mexican, Chinese, and Thai, had many delicious plant-based dishes. In many cases, I could make relatively simple modifications to favorite dishes that still preserved their taste and essence. I even found ways to continue enjoying ice cream and chocolate—yes, there are delicious whole-food, plant-based versions of these treats as well.

In the end, with an open mind, a bit of patience, and a willingness to try some new things, I found myself very satisfied and able to enjoy delicious food without feeling deprived... all the while losing weight and breaking free from what I thought was my genetic fate.

Taking the Plant-Based Message to Patients

As I began to see my own profound health benefits, I started to enthusiastically recommend this lifestyle to many of my patients and colleagues. Seeing Drs. Lederman and Pulde work with their patients in *Forks Over Knives* to reverse chronic conditions and eliminate medications inspired me to envision new possibilities for my own practice.

While I've had some success with individuals, I'm now conceiving a group program, where my patients can get the education and the support they need to adopt a plant-based lifestyle. I've also helped convince my medical group to organize a 21-day plant-based kick-start challenge for our employees and physicians. As we healthcare providers become plant-based ourselves, we will be able to help many more of our patients do the same.

Not only does this lifestyle consistently improve the lives of those making the change, but it also has the potential, over time, to transform healthcare as we know it—reversing obesity and related chronic diseases, and reducing skyrocketing healthcare costs. With my eyes opened to these new possibilities, I feel a renewed sense of optimism for my chosen profession ... it's an exciting time to be a doctor!