

THE WEIGHING GAME

Why it's dangerous to rely on what your scales say

By Michelle Brannan

Are you weighing yourself every day and seeing different readings, or training hard and eating clean only to find the number on the scales is stubbornly refusing to go down?

If you feel you are making progress, only for your scales to suggest otherwise, perhaps it's time to ditch them.

Scale weight can fluctuate on a daily basis, giving you false impressions. The reading doesn't always mean you have put on fat, or lost any.

Perhaps you have stepped on the scales on a Monday morning and found your weight has increased by 5 lbs over the weekend. But did you really gain 5 lbs of body fat in two days? It is very doubtful.

It's been said that "one bad meal won't make you fat and one good meal won't make you thin", so lets consider what's happening.

It is widely agreed that 1 lb of body fat is equivalent to 3,500 calories. Most people do not eat that many extra calories at the weekend or in a cheat meal so clearly there are other factors. Water is one of the main ones.

The average human body is made up of approximately 65% water. It is found both inside and outside the cells and has a number of bodily purposes.

Water levels fluctuate considerably, which can be due to a number of everyday factors as well as specific medical conditions.

1 SODIUM IN DIET

A sudden increase in the consumption of sodium may shift your electrolyte balance and cause your body to hold water. Pre-packed, counter and restaurant foods contain a lot more salt and additives than fresh foods to enhance taste and preserve shelf life. This can make you double or triple your salt intake without even realising.

Salt doesn't make you fat but isn't healthy in large quantities. A sudden increase in sodium is the most likely cause of scale weight gain, particularly if you've just eaten something you didn't prepare yourself.

2 NOT DRINKING ENOUGH WATER

This may sound contradictory but not consuming enough water may cause your body to hold fluid and lead to water retention. This will make you appear heavier on the scales and feel puffy in clothes.

Aim to drink 3-4 litres of water each day, particularly if you're exercising or it's hot and you are losing water. You don't need any more than this. Drinking too much

water can lead to over-hydration, which can have a negative impact on the normal electrolyte balance and is dangerous.

Dehydration can temporarily shift the scales the other way so if you have been drinking alcohol the night before you might be lighter the next day but this is only a temporary weight loss.

3 CARBOHYDRATE INTAKE

Carbohydrates are used for energy. Carbohydrates that are broken down to glucose are also used to restore muscle glycogen. The more muscle you have the more glycogen you are able to store and this may explain an increase in scale weight.

Carbohydrates draw water into the cells. For every 1 gram of carbohydrate, approximately 3 grams of water are retained. So if you eat a carbohydrate-rich meal you will feel the difference in muscle fullness, particularly if your carb intake has been low. If you eat more than your body needs to restore muscle and liver glycogen you may feel full and puffy. Combine this with an increase in sodium and you can very easily weigh 5 lbs more in one day.

4 POOR DIGESTION

This can make it difficult to empty your bowels adequately and draw water into the intestines, both of which can make you feel bloated and uncomfortable.

There are many reasons for digestive disorders. Common causes are: eating the wrong types of food and not consuming enough fibre to aid the passage of food through the intestines.

In people without pre-existing conditions or food intolerances correcting poor digestion is usually just a matter of increasing green or fibrous vegetable intake and possibly having a good bacteria supplement to restore any imbalances in the gut.



5 HORMONAL CHANGES

A woman's menstrual cycle can affect water retention. Elevated oestrogen levels can cause some women to experience water retention, usually in the week leading up to menses.

Other hormones in the body, including cortisol, can also cause fluid retention. Cortisol is known as the stress hormone because it is secreted by the adrenal glands when the body is under stress. So, anything from a hectic workload to a prolonged calorie deficit due to diet could be causing fluid retention and an apparent weight increase.

6 WEIGHT TRAINING

Long-term weight training can increase muscle tissue, which can make you heavier. Muscle is denser and more compact than fat so even if you lose body fat but increase muscle tissue, and appear smaller and tighter, you may actually weigh more. In this instance the scales are not a useful indicator of progress. Weight training can also increase bone density, which is a contributing factor to scale weight.

Having considered the above, don't just rely on stepping on scales to monitor your progress it is better to use different methods to assess how you're doing. Take pictures of yourself, take circumference measurements, and look in the mirror and see what you actually look like. I use scale weight as a guide but I don't let it rule my life.

How you look and feel is what is important. Scale weight, after all, is nothing but a number.

MICHELLE BRANNAN

is a British IFBB pro bikini fitness competitor. She won the 2012 British Grand Prix, competed at the 2013 Bikini Olympia and runs a training team called Showgirl Fitness. For more information visit showgirlfitness.com.



SIMON HOWARD