

Danger: Diet Disaster Area Ahead!

How to navigate potholes on the dieting highway without gaining a pound.

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WebMD Feature

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It's the all-you-can-eat buffet at your favorite restaurant, or the vacation where you just want to let loose. Or, worse yet, it's Aunt Sophie piling mega-portions of her secret-recipe garlic butter mashed potatoes on your plate at the weekly family dinner.

Whatever your own personal "diet disaster zone," it's a person, place, or situation that can leave you heavy with guilt and extra pounds.

Here are some common potholes along the [dieting](#) highway that you should be wary of, along with tips from experts on how to navigate around them without gaining a pound.

Restaurant Ruination

The Disaster: Your favorite restaurant, offering up an all-you-can-eat buffet bar or portions of creamy, buttery pasta that are too big for three people, let alone one.

"Restaurants are tricky," says Rick Hall, a registered dietitian in Phoenix. "We feel our pocketbooks [itching](#) on our legs because we're paying so much for the food, so we feel like we can't let it go to waste. Even if they bring you a huge portion, you feel like you need to eat it all because you're paying \$50, \$60 or more for what's in front of you."

The appetizers don't help, especially when they come in the form of baskets brimming with bread (with butter on the side, of course).

"What happens is you're so hungry when you get there, that when the waiter brings out the bread, you fill up on it," says Hall, who lectures on [nutrition](#) issues at Arizona State University. "But then you still eat a full meal."

Coping Strategies: "First and foremost, skip the bread," says Hall. "In fact, ask the waiter not even to bring it out to the table."

Next, ask the waiter how generous the portion sizes are. If they're big enough to feed a small army, share the wealth.

"Ask the server what the portion sizes are, and if you can share -- most places these days will let you do that," says Hall. "And the good news is that if you share your main course, you can share a dessert as well." (Of course, if your dining companions aren't into sharing, there's always the doggie bag.)

Whether you're eating out or in, eating slowly is another tool for portion control.

"It can take up to 20 minutes to feel full, so eat slowly," says Hall. "Otherwise, you just keep eating when really you should be done. And even though it seems simple, when you are full, stop eating." And if your favorite restaurant is the dreaded all-you-can-eat buffet? It's time to find a new haunt.

"Avoid the all-you-can-eat places like the [plague](#)," says Hall. "It's just illogical to eat that much food."

Travel Troubles

The Disaster Area: Vacations, which for many people are all about eating, drinking, and relaxing.

Travel Troubles continued...

"People tend to lose sight of what their dieting goals are on vacation," says Hall. "Health and nutrition are not really top of mind."

Mix that with little to no exercise and you have a recipe for dieting disaster: "The other problem is that most people are not very active on vacation," says Hall.

Coping Strategies: "First, decide what the vacation is all about for you," says **Susan Mitchell, a registered dietitian and author of *Fat is Not Your Fate***. "Is it OK for you to overeat and scrap your diet, or are you going to be careful?" The important thing is to balance out your indulgences with healthy choices.

"Many hotels have small refrigerators in the rooms," says Mitchell. "So if you know you want to go out for dinner and maybe splurge on a few extra calories, keep some healthy food stocked in your room for **breakfast** and lunch."

And while exercise may not be your primary concern while on vacation, it's not too difficult to work some in here and there.

"You don't have to use the gym while on vacation, but you can go for walks and try to balance sitting on the beach with exploring and walking around," says Hall.

For Linda Neuman, who lost 53 pounds and has kept it off for more than a year, vacations are challenging, but not impossible.

"I left for vacation right before the holidays, and from there I had a business convention," says Neuman, a certified public accountant from Orlando, Fla. "I made sure when I was eating out I did not eat the whole portion -- I would put half of it aside and box it up for later. And I walked as much as I could, since I wasn't able to do my normal exercise routine.

"While eating out for two weeks and not being in my normal routine was tough, I was proud because I came back and had only gained one pound."

Family Frustration

The Disaster: Family gatherings at which you sit down to huge portions of fatty foods -- and are pressured to eat, eat!

"Most families offer loving environments, so when it comes to dinners, your relatives who make the dish want to make sure you enjoy it to the fullest extent, so they'll encourage you to keep eating," says Hall.

"We eat because people are telling us to. We also have this idea, that most of us have grown up with, that we have to clean our plates, which isn't necessarily a good message."

Coping Strategies: Be polite but stand your ground, even with family members.

"You have to nicely say, when someone is offering you something for the third time, 'Oh Auntie Sophie, I absolutely love your mashed potatoes, but I can't eat another bite,' and be firm about it," says Mitchell.

Family Frustration continued...

Also, remember not to bite off more than you can chew.

"We had this big family reunion and there were people there we hadn't seen in a long time, and everyone wanted you to try just a little bit, which was tough," says Neuman. "I made sure if I tried something, it was just a tiny bit -- not a normal portion size -- just to make them happy. So I focused on the salads and drank plenty of water. The good news was, I was the center of attention because I had lost so much weight." Some families, though, may see thinness as a threat or even a sign of ill health. In that case, it may be best not to spill too much about your weight loss plans.

"Don't tell your family you are trying to lose weight," Mitchell tells WebMD. "If you tell them that, they'll start in with 'you don't need to lose weight, you're too thin -- eat!'"

Workplace Woes

Disaster Area: Long days and late nights at the office, especially when co-workers so nicely leave sweets out on their desks for all to enjoy.

"The office is conducive to snacking," says Hall. "From birthday parties, to doughnuts in the morning at a meeting, to snacks on someone's desk, people eat these foods and they're forgotten calories, but really, they're adding up."

Coping Strategies: "It's important to recognize that just because it's someone's birthday at the office doesn't mean you have to eat cake," says Hall. "Or if you really want to have cake or a doughnut, share it with someone. Or step up to plan the event, and offer healthier choices."

And be sure to plan ahead so you're prepared when hunger strikes during the workday.

"Fill your pantry and fridge with a multitude of snacks: grapes, cherries, cheese, raisins, trail mix, or healthy granola bars," says Mitchell. "Every day you can grab two or three snacks" from your supply.

"That way at 5:30 when you are starting to get hungry for dinner but you have a long night in front of you, you have healthy snacks to take the edge off," she says.

Says Neuman: "I always have a small bag of fruit and nuts at my desk so if I'm hungry, I have something healthy to snack on. I also always make sure I drink plenty of water at work."

Disaster-Dodging Tips

Whatever diet disaster areas you may run across on your way to your goal, here are some tips you can take with you:

- Anticipate. "Plan ahead," says Susan Moores, a registered dietitian in St. Paul, Minn. "What is the situation going to be like? Is it your favorite restaurant that you go to once a year? Then maybe you go and have a great time. If it's the fifth night you've stayed late at the office, and you know they are all doing take-out Chinese again, maybe you do something different, like bring a healthier option with you, or go extra-healthy for breakfast and lunch."
- Be creative. "Often, we think the cards are stacked against us in a situation, but there are creative ways to get around a trap," says Moores, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "If you know breakfast is a huge buffet every morning at your hotel, you don't have to have it -- many will offer a continental breakfast instead, or you can stock up on fruit to balance out your day later on."
- Have a Plan B. "As much as it's great to plan ahead, you also need a rebound plan," Moores tells WebMD. "I had a really great time at dinner last night, so today I'm going to go with fruits and veggies." Move on and get past it."

- Be proactive. "Always recognize that physical activity can't fix everything, but it sure can make it better," says Moores. "A brisk walk can really make you feel good."
- Drink to your success. "If all else fails, be happy with what you did with your beverages," says Moores. "Almost everywhere you go will offer you healthy choices for drinks, even just water, so feel good about the decisions you make around the things you can control."