

Five Ways I lost 50 lbs

By Kenny Bellew

"I can't get this jacket to zip."

The sales person handed me a different jacket.

"Try this extra large."



I pulled on the jacket. It was sexy. A white stripe banded the chest. The handsome leather smell gestured adventure and dare. I zipped it up. My arms dangled at my sides. My finger tips poked out from the ends of the sleeves like grubs hiding from the sun.

"The sleeves are too long. Do you have this size with shorter sleeves?"

I tried another and saw the same. I went to other stores, riffled through racks of jackets, but I couldn't find a leather coat that fit. Was it a conspiracy? I hadn't had this fitting problem the last time. With so many fat people, you'd think I could find a medium-sized sleeve length in a leather jacket I could zip. Apparently, I was fatter than fat. I was bluer than blue. I needed to lose 50 lbs.

Unfortunately, vanity wasn't the only reason I needed to lose 50 lbs. My doctor told me that my bad cholesterol was scary, my good cholesterol was terrible and my triglyceride levels were probably passed around the lab with gasps of concern.

Step 1: I made a plan and set goals.

I've always been good at losing weight but bad at keeping it off— until now. This time, my strategy worked. I really did something different. My plan was to use strict low-carb dieting to lose 30 lbs, and then switch to a life-long plan (more fruits and grains) that would help me to lose the remaining 20 lbs.

In doing so, I would learn healthy eating habits that I could live with for life. I also planned to increase my cardio workouts to a minimum of 30 minutes per day, five times per week. Next, I threw in a vanity goal— "Just once, before I die, I wanted to see my abs."

Step 2: I talked to my doctor.

It is important to understand how dramatic changes to eating and lifestyle are affecting your body. Regardless of advice we think we are following, we all have our own preferences for making things work. When we tease out the details of our health, some of us start popping every supplement in the magazine or eating strange foods found only in remote rainforests. I knew that if I did things wrongly, I could quickly devastate my health.

For example, recent studies show that a low-carb diet, which might be rich in fats, can maintain healthy blood lipid profiles, but only if you actually dramatically reduce your carbohydrate intake (between 20 - 40 net grams per day in the beginning of the diet).

We've been conditioned to think of all fruits as diet foods. A common low-carb diet mistake is to increase consumption of high-sugar fruits, like apples and apricots, which contain greater amounts of carbohydrates. Even though fruit has a low glycemic index, high-sugar fruits are still loaded with carbohydrates and can sabotage attempts to reach low-carb goals. For example, an average banana has 26 grams of carbohydrates. In the early phase of my diet, I was trying to eat less than 40 net carbs per day. One banana would have gobbled up most of my allowance.

If a low-carb diet can protect from higher triglyceride and LDL (low-density lipoprotein) cholesterol numbers, a low-carb diet executed improperly may result in dangerous increases in these numbers. When I began making dramatic changes to my diet to fix my poor blood lipid numbers, my doctor recommended quarterly blood tests to monitor my progress. After losing 50 lbs, he told me how

impressed he was with my progress. “You’re an example to us all at how lifestyle changes can dramatically improve health.” My triglycerides went from 669 to 38 (between 40 and 149 is normal).

Step Two: I stopped eating sugar and starchy foods: bread, rice, pasta and potatoes.

The *New England Journal of Medicine* recently published the result of a two-year study comparing the effectiveness of three major dieting methods (NEJM July 2008):

1. Low-fat, reduced-calorie diet: This diet followed the American Heart Association guidelines of 1500 calories per day for women and 1800 for men, with 30% of the calories from fat and 10% from saturated fat. The diet was limited to 300 mg of cholesterol daily.
2. Mediterranean (lots of plant foods and some olive oil), reduced-calorie diet: This diet aimed for 1500 calories per day for women, 1800 calories for men, with 35% of the calories from fat (mostly from olive oil and nuts).
3. Low-carbohydrate, non-calorie-restricted diet: This diet aimed for consuming no more than 20 grams of carbohydrates daily for the first two months (induction period) and then no more than 120 grams per day afterward. Calories and fat were not limited. Participants were encouraged to eat vegetarian sources of fat.

I was not surprised that the study showed slightly more weight loss on the low-carb diet than the other two diets. However, I was astonished to read that the low-carb diet group had better cholesterol numbers than the low-fat group. Though further study is needed, this seems to indicate that our bodies can process higher levels of fat when combined with a low-carb diet.

For me, removing starchy foods made the diet easier to follow. If potatoes, bread, and things made of flour, are off the menu, I'm not snacking on donuts, buying potato chips from the vending machine or

eating the wrong thing at McDonald's. If pasta and rice are off my list, I'm ordering extra vegetables instead of a side of rigatoni. "Could I please have a double portion of steamed broccoli instead of rice?"

I wasn't sure how I would survive without pizza. I used to say that it was the world's most perfect food. However, I discovered that I can eat the top of the pizza, and I get nearly all the flavor I love. Then, I give the bottom of the pizza to my dogs, who think pizza crust is the world's most perfect snack.

Now that I've lost 50 lbs, I still avoid starchy foods. I order salad-meat combos or fish and vegetables or chicken and vegetables at restaurants. I snack on fruits and nuts. I make vegetables my entree and meat my side dish. I eat smaller portions.

Step Three: I had to exercise consistently.

When you're fatter than fat, it's hard to run on a treadmill. I just couldn't do it. Not only did my shins scream in pain, but the treadmill begged for mercy. When I tried to run at the gym, it sounded like Godzilla was stomping through Tokyo.

Until I dropped some weight, I was forced to do lower impact exercises. I chose walking and the recumbent bike. The key to a good cardio workout is making sure you are working up to the right intensity. If I could jabber a joke with my mother on the cell phone while riding my recumbent bike, I was not exercising hard enough. If I could articulate my co-worker's love life to my walking partner in long animated sentences, I was not exercising hard enough. At the proper level, I should only be able to get out short sentences between breaths. I had to choose activities that allowed me to get my heart rate up to the proper level.

Once I lost about 30 lbs, I was able to start running on the treadmill. The more weight I lost, the more cardio I could do, and, in turn, the more weight I lost. It's a beautiful circle. With dieting, it gets easier with success. Without excuse, I made sure I exercised at least 30 minutes a day, five days per week- at

the proper intensity. Once I neared my weight loss goal, I begin to crave hard cardio workouts and the endorphin rush they bring.

Step Four: Set a lofty, but serious, vanity goal.

My lofty goal is to have six-pack abs. Think about a guy who's fatter than fat dreaming about having six-pack abs. It's almost humorous. He can't even zip up a medium-sized leather jacket over his roly-poly belly.

The reason it was important to set serious, but lofty goals, was to keep me from getting complacent. Once I lost three-fourths of my target weight, I could be tempted to coast a little. I might think that I could have a few more special celebration meals. Then, it's not long before all of my gains are slipping away.

Every morning, when I stand in front of the mirror, I say "Good progress, but there's still work to do. I can't see my abs yet." If I gain weight, I think, "I'll never reach my goal this way. What do I need to fix?" When I actually reach my lofty goal, I will be so proud of my accomplishment that I will fight to maintain it.

Step Five: I record my weight every Sunday morning.

I created a chart with several columns: one with the date, one that records my current weight and one that reports the amount of weight I've lost or gained. I plan on filling out this chart every week for the rest of my life. Never again will five lbs sneak up on me like ninja mimes in the dark. If it tries, I'm trained to fight back.

P.S. I went back to the leather jacket store and tried on the jacket that I couldn't zip. Wouldn't you know it? Now it's too big.

Possible sidebars

HEALTH NUMBERS

When starting a diet and exercise program, monitor the following health numbers regularly:

- HDL (good cholesterol) should be greater than 40 mg/dL for men and greater than 50 mg/dL for women.
- LDL (bad cholesterol) should be lower than 131 mg/dL (other coronary risk factors may affect target goals)
- Triglycerides should be between 40 – 149 mg/dL
- Blood Pressure should be about 120/80

GLYCEMIC INDEX

Dieticians refer to fruit carbohydrates as the "good carbs" because they have a low glycemic index. The glycemic index is a measurement of how quickly a carbohydrate increases blood sugar (glucose). White bread has a high glycemic index, while most fruits have a low glycemic index. Lower is better.