Excuse-Proof Your Diet

I'm too busy. I'm stressed. I have PMS. Sound familiar? Here's how to stop whining and start losing. **By Alexa Joy Sherman   Illustrations by Alli Arnold**

Oops, I did it again. I gave in to the late-night siren song of Ben & Jerry's blaring from my freezer. As I scarf down New York Super Fudge Chunk, I come up with all kinds of reasons I need, even deserve, it. "We fool ourselves into thinking it's OK to give in to temptation, focusing on short-term gratification instead of long-term consequences," says psychologist Judith S. Beck, Ph.D., author of *The Beck Diet Solution.* Here, nine diet cop-outs and ways to reclaim control and ditch the excuses—and the excess pounds—for good.

Cop out:

"I'm on vacation."

Everyone deserves a little R & R, but when rest equals a hiatus from exercise, and relaxation means eating everything in sight, you'll be packing more pounds on your return trip. "A few cocktails and three restaurant meals can easily sneak in an extra 2,000 to 3,000 daily calories," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, R.D., a FITNESS advisory board member and author of *The Flexitarian Diet*. "In one week, that can add up to four to six pounds of fat."
Take charge. "Don't plan for perfection; instead, plan to indulge in moderation by paring down portions," Blatner suggests. Tasting the culture is part of the experience, so sample the local delicacies and skip the stuff you can get anywhere. (Brie in France? *Oui*. French fries? *Non*.) Do the opposite with vacay libations: Stick with your usual white wine or Bloody Mary as opposed to sugary, umbrella-adorned drinks. Finally, work some calorie-blasting fun into the itinerary: Go sightseeing by bike or try a new activity, like surfing.

Cop-out:

"I have PMS."

Take comfort in the fact that symptoms like cramps and mood swings aren't totally in your head. You may be extra susceptible to carb attacks; although we all experience fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone, certain women are more affected by them. "It's possible that those who are prone to PMS experience a drop in the brain chemical serotonin, and that can cause a spike in appetite—especially cravings for carbohydrates," explains Stephanie Collins Reed,

Ph.D., assistant professor of clinical neurobiology at Columbia University.
Take charge. Tame the PMS monster by tracking your cycle at mymonthly cycles.com (or try the iPeriod app); it will help you keep your blood sugar stable while your hormones ride the roller coaster. In the week before and during your period, reach for healthy, high-fiber snacks every few hours; choose those that provide a steady release of energy and satisfy your sweet—or salty—tooth. "Dip four strawberries in two tablespoons melted dark chocolate chips and refrigerate

for 10 minutes, or have three cups of air-popped popcorn sprinkled with Parmesan," Blatner suggests.

Cop-out:

"But he's eating all that!"

The sexes are supposed to be equal, but our metabolism never got the memo. Men burn more calories at rest because they tend to have more muscle (muscle blasts more calories than fat does). Do the math: A 30-year-old man who is five feet 10 inches tall and weighs 175 pounds burns about

Don't let PMS derail your diet. Crazy mood swings do not justify a headfirst dive into a pint of ice cream.

ICE CREAM

Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate!

AM ICE CREAM ICE
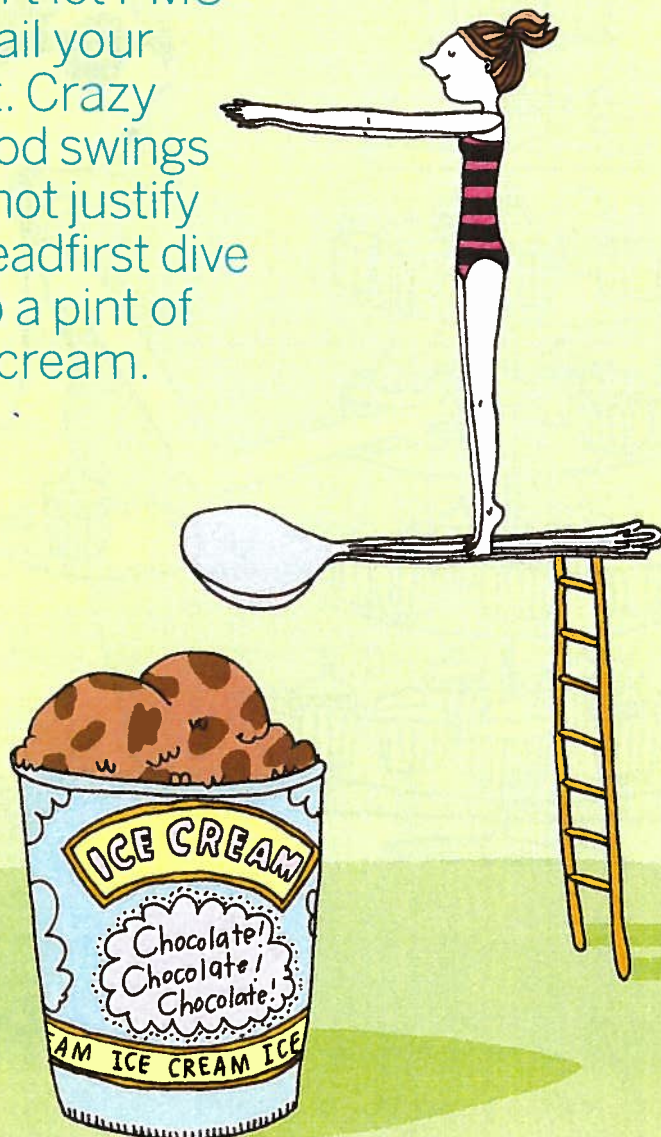
2,600 calories a day, while a woman of the same age, weight and height burns a little more than 2,200 calories a day. "Women are gaining more weight because they're consuming the same huge portions," explains weight-loss expert Jim Karas, author of *The 7-Day Energy Surge*.
Take charge. Instead of eating like a man, try exercising like one, with an emphasis on strength moves. If you don't have time to hit the weight room, do 10 push-ups and Supermans (lie on your stomach and raise your head, arms and legs off the ground, as if you're flying, for as long as you can; rest for 30 seconds and repeat). Do three sets every other day and you'll build maximum muscle in minimum time. When mealtime rolls around, have half of what he's having. (Hint: Use a smaller plate to make the difference less obvious.)

Cop-out:
"What's a movie without Milk Duds?"
Snacks at the cinema, chili dogs at the ballpark, chocolate cake at a birthday party—we're conditioned to eat in so many places and situations. "It's nearly impossible to walk into the movies and not be tempted by popcorn," says Susan M. Kleiner, Ph.D., R.D., author of *The Good Mood Diet*. "You figure everyone else is eating it, and it's part of the experience, so you should have it too."
Take charge. Retrain your brain so that *Twilight* does not equal a tub of popcorn with extra butter. Before you leave home, pack a lighter version of your usual treat (veggie-flavored Pirate's Booty for the movies, a six-pack of light beer for the neighborhood barbecue) and, to steel your willpower, jot down what you're going to eat. Visualize how great you'll feel when you walk out of the theater without the weight of the

butter-drenched popcorn or leave the cookout without a bloated beer belly—and how happy you'll be when you step on the scale the next day.

Cop-out:
"I'm so stressed out."
Blame it on evolution: When you're under pressure, your body releases hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, prompting temporary spikes in energy, metabolism and blood sugar. According to research, women who are frazzled often turn to foods like ice cream and pizza. Chronic stress is especially dangerous: Over time, high cortisol levels can lead to fat storage in the abdomen, upping your risk for obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.
Take charge. Blatner recommends making a list of calorie-free stress busters, which might include taking a walk around the block or listening to relaxing music. "When you get the urge to splurge, consult the list and do one of the activities for 10 minutes; that's often long enough to distract you from the craving," she says. If you can't squelch your stress *or* appetite, opt for healthy protein (lean turkey or low-fat cottage cheese). "Protein raises blood sugar and keeps it stable for several hours," explains Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., author of *Beat Sugar Addiction Now*. "Sugar helps you feel better for only about an hour."

Resist that buttery tub at the movies by focusing on the big picture. Remind yourself that your long-term goals trump a quick-fix popcorn pig-out.

Cop-out:
"I've been good all week."
You were the picture of dietary perfection Monday through Friday, and now it's time to celebrate with a champagne brunch, a three-course dinner and an evening of barhopping. Welcome to the weekend weight-gainers club! Researchers from the University of North Carolina discovered that people in the United States consume an average of 115 calories more per day on the weekend. This may not sound like much, but it adds up to an extra five pounds a year (and jeans that are way too tight). Plus, splurging on Saturday and Sunday often spills over into the workweek.

Starving yourself until dinner isn't a diet tactic; it's a diet trap. Your hunger hormones will be begging for chocolate, potato chips and pizza with extra cheese.

Take charge. Instead of thinking, "TGIF…I can finally eat something," spread out your indulgences—a frozen yogurt here, a glass of wine there—through the week. Try not to make the weekend a restaurant marathon; when you are going to eat out, schedule a predinner jog or postbrunch hike.

Cop-out:

"I haven't eaten all day."
You bypassed breakfast and hardly touched your lunch, so you feel like the queen of willpower—until you blow those saved-up calories (and more) on an enormous dinner. Skimping on meals early in the day often backfires because it boosts the production of ghrelin. This sneaky hunger hormone doesn't just encourage you to eat; it also tells you to go

for the good, but not good-for-you, stuff. A recent study found that when test subjects either fasted or received a ghrelin injection, they preferred diet-busting munchies like cake, chocolate and pizza to veggies, salad and fish.

Take charge. Outsmart your hunger hormones by eating every three hours; research shows that the more often people dine throughout the day, the less likely they are to be obese. "Keep satisfying snacks— an apple and almonds, cucumber slices and hummus—at your office or prepped in your fridge," Blatner suggests. Not a frequent eater? Make it a habit by using a food diary, and jot down when you eat in addition to what you eat. If you notice you're going more than three hours without a snack, set a timer to help you stay on track.

Cop-out:
"I need a pick-me-up."

Ah, the mid-afternoon slump, when you want to curl up in your cubicle. Of course, you also want to keep your job, so you opt for a Snickers instead of a siesta. Turns out you're not just lazy. Our circadian rhythms (the physical, mental and behavioral habits controlled by our biological clocks) actually make us want to take an afternoon nap: An energy dip occurs about halfway between the time we awake and hit the sack. That means if you're up at 7 and go to bed at night by 11, your slump will hit around 3 p.m. Because studies also link fatigue and high-carb snack attacks, the afternoon munchies mystery is solved.

Take charge. If you're at home, take a 30- to 60-minute catnap to recharge your batteries. Researchers in Japan recently reported that it's an effective way to boost energy and alertness. At work, go for a quick walk. A recent University of Georgia study found that just three low-intensity workouts a week raised people's energy levels by 20 percent and decreased fatigue by 65 percent after six weeks.

Cop-out:
"I'm too busy to eat right."

The more hectic our lives become, the less time we seem to have for our health. Case in point: A recent Cornell study found that parents who work long hours rely heavily on take-out and restaurant food. The irony is that while many of us claim we're too busy to prepare a nutritious dinner, we still find time to watch *American Idol* as we wait for the pizza.

Take charge. Instead of opting for that 30-minutes-or-less delivery guarantee and settling in with Randy and Ellen, try one of our 20-minute recipes at fitnessmagazine.com/quickdinner. Or prep a week's worth of meals ahead of time. Grilling chicken breasts and prechopping vegetables are obvious shortcuts, but you can also hard-boil eggs or even precook whole-grain pasta (simply warm small portions in the microwave or a skillet). "These foods will last in the refrigerator for five days," Blatner says. Still too much work? Try our lazy girl's grocery list: rotisserie chicken, frozen vegetables and unsweetened fruits, boxes of quick-cooking brown rice or other whole grains, and veggie trays with dip for a quick snack or to throw into a speedy stir-fry (without the dip). See how healthy fast food can be? ∎