

Be proactive — and active — to avoid holiday weight gain

BY DANA GEORGE
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Weight gain is not inevitable during the holidays.

Just ask Florine Mark, president and chairman of the board of The WW Group, Inc., the largest franchise of Weight Watchers International. She says the holidays can be the perfect time to begin losing weight.

"The best time to join Weight Watchers is really now so you don't wake up on Jan. 1 with 10 pounds more than you have now," Mark said from her Farmington Hills office.

And lest we assume dieting equates deprivation, Mark is quick to set the record straight.

"Our new slogan is, 'Eating is not cheating,'" Mark said. "Our new program is called Flex Points. It means that you have 35 extra points at the end of the week to use if you need them."

Weight Watchers assigns each food a point value and members are allotted a particular number of points each day. 35 Flex Points mean that dieters can splurge on a food they really crave, or celebrate a special occasion without guilt.

Mark says that most members eat around 20 points a day, and that those 35 points represent more than a day and a-half of food.

"Many don't use them unless they have to, but they have them there if they need them," Mark said.

One person who's not worried about gaining weight during the holidays is Sylvia Norton of Acme. Norton, 49, has lost 69 pounds since January through the Weight Watchers plan and daily exercise.

Norton says that she's dealt with weight issues all of her life, and first became a member of Weight Watchers when she was 16 and "old enough to get a car and drive."

It had been years though, and Norton had no intention of joining Weight Watchers again. She only agreed to

attend a meeting last January 4 so that her sister, Joan Weatherholt, would have company.

"I was going to do it long enough to get her settled, then I was going to quit. But it was really fun because both of us were doing it. I like making food plans with her and talking to other people about weight issues," Norton said.

In 25 months Norton had shed 25 pounds and agreed to attend Women's Fitness and Health in Acme with friend Julie Stack.

"I had no intention of joining a gym," Norton said of the 30-minute fitness program. "But I liked the exercise and liked the social part of it. It's not a hoity toity kind of thing, just a fun thing to do."

Norton has dropped an additional 44 pounds in the past six months. And now that she has the weight off — and is within 10 pounds of her ultimate weight-loss goal — Norton says that the holidays won't derail her.

"I have a plan," Norton says. "I'm going to stay at the lowest points that I can and then on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day I will eat whatever I want to."

Norton will continue exercising on a daily basis, and says that she won't become discouraged.

"Most of the time I say, 'I have a plan and this is how it's going to work.' Then that little guy comes into the back of my mind and says, 'You're not going to be able to do it,'" Norton said. "Okay, so it might be January instead of Christmas when I reach my goal, but I will make it."

When Norton is tempted to over-indulge she says she'll look at her "before" photos.

"I just feel a whole lot better about myself. Before, I thought people looked at me and laughed because I was heavy."

Not only is Norton encouraged by her newly slim body, but she's especially excited about the health improvements she's experienced.

"At my heaviest my doctor

was planning to put me on high blood pressure medicine. I had an appointment with my gynecologist this morning and my blood pressure was 108/68. It's never been that low," Norton said.

Vern Gauthier, co-owner (with brother Jeff) of Fit For You in Traverse City, says that forgiveness can go a long way toward maintaining a healthy weight during the holidays.

"If you eat something you shouldn't have, it doesn't mean you have to take the rest of the day off, or the rest of the week off. Go on to your next meal and continue with your food plan. Messing up isn't the end of the world. We're all human, and everybody slides back," Gauthier said.

A good exercise and nutrition program can begin anytime during the year, Gauthier said. The idea is to stick with it.

"Consistency is one of the most important things in order to make progress. The more you progress the more you're motivated."

Stress becomes an issue for many during the holidays and few things help combat

stress like exercise.

"It doesn't take long to get endorphins kicking in. You can feel better right away," Gauthier said.

Florine Mark says that exercise is an essential part of her day.

"Exercise is an important thing we do for ourselves. Wake up a little early and walk around the house. Maybe buy a gift for the family like a stationary bike or treadmill. Put it in front of the television whenever you want," Mark said. "But do it every single day."

Mark has found an unconventional style of exercise that works perfectly for her. "I love to dance. I go in the bedroom, lock the door, put on rock or jazz or tango, and just dance for 20 minutes to a-half hour. For just a little while I'm the star of 'A Chorus Line.' I do it until I'm sweating and feel good about myself," Mark said.

Mark, whose book "Talk to the Mirror" is due out next summer, offers these tips for getting through the holidays without added stress or added weight:

■ Become a list maker. Figure out what you have to

do, how much time you have, and decide what actually needs to get done. Don't try to squeeze six events into a schedule that only allows for four.

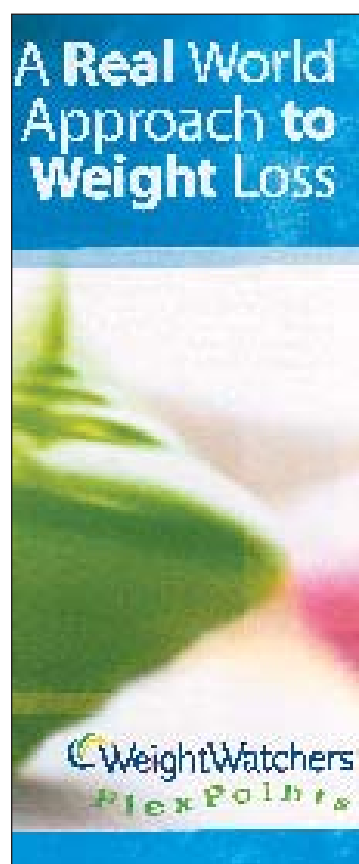
■ Plan one day at a time. "I only ask myself to do stuff for one day. I don't say, 'I'm going to lose 50 pounds.' I don't say, 'I'm never going to eat that again.'" said Mark. "I just plan to stick to my points for one day at a time. I never ask myself to do something that I'm going to fail at."

■ Take one hour a day for yourself. "We have approximately 16 waking hours. Take one of those to do something nice for yourself. That might be exercising, planning healthy meals, taking a bath or calling a friend."

For those occasions when her own resolve slips, Mark remembers why she follows these rules.

"Obesity is a major leading cause for all major diseases," she said. "I have five children and a number of grandchildren and I want to live a long time."

Dana George is a local freelance writer.



Weight Watchers' Florine Mark says that the best time to have a diet plan is now and not after another round of holidays — and weight gain.

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