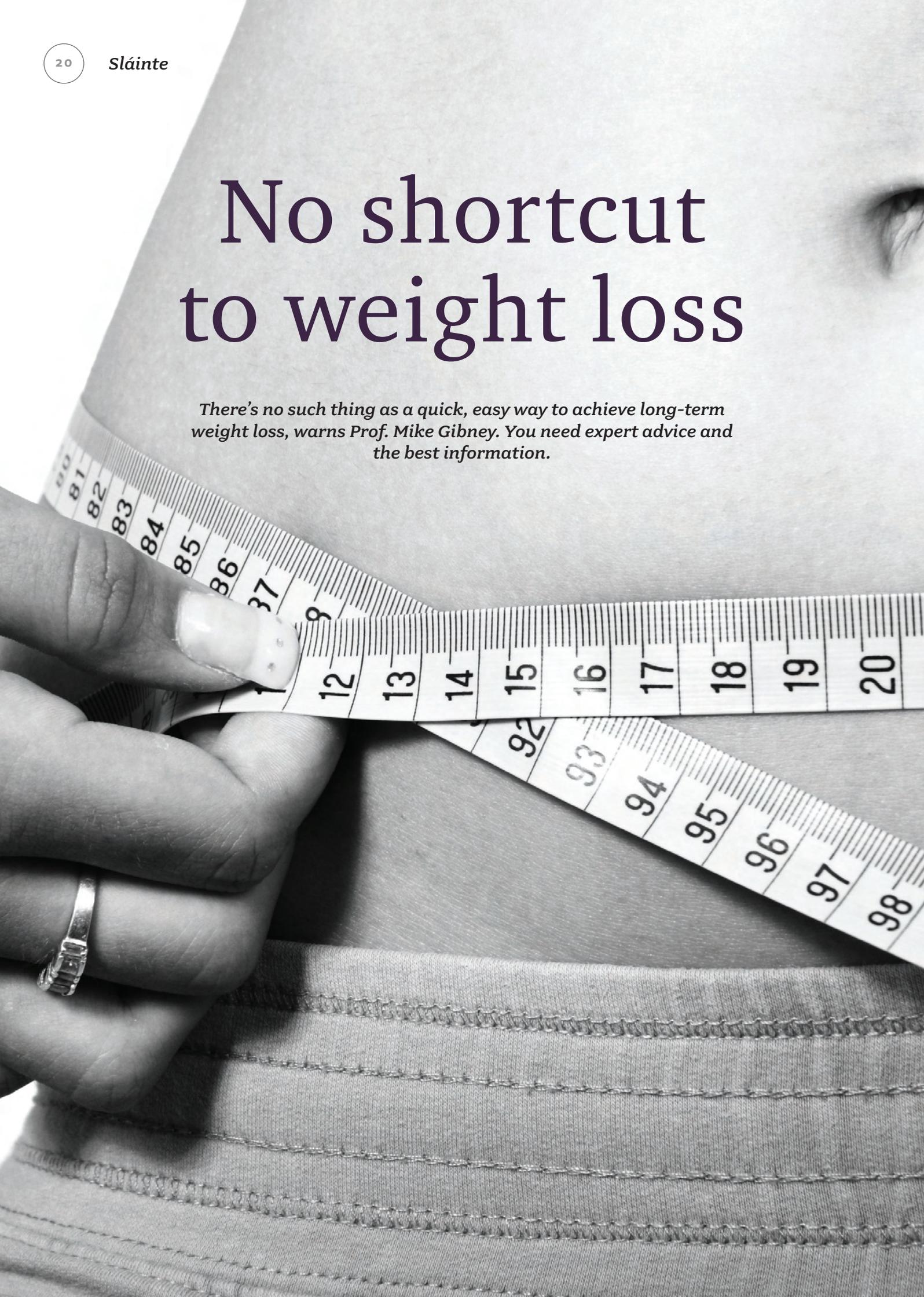


No shortcut to weight loss

There's no such thing as a quick, easy way to achieve long-term weight loss, warns Prof. Mike Gibney. You need expert advice and the best information.





With the exception of Sumo wrestlers, nobody sets out to gain weight. Instead, weight gain is like many chronic diseases that bedevil our health systems, the downward spiral is slow and stealthy.

And although most of us at some time have sought to lose weight, the reality is that around 95% will regain it over five years. Even under strict experimental weight loss conditions, where subjects receive regular professional advice, around 50% will relapse after two years in the study.

So when I'm asked about losing weight, I always caution people to know why they are setting out on what is going to be a mammoth struggle. The first rule is to go to your doctor and have a check-up, with a simple focus on blood pressure, blood lipids and blood glucose. If all three are hunky-dory, then my advice is: why bother losing weight? I would then recommend they must undertake 30 minutes a day of moderately intensive exercise, five days per week. Even if the clinical signs seem normal now, a sedentary lifestyle is the perfect breeding ground for developing high blood pressure, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

So, you've had your clinical exam, passed with flying colours, and started a physical activity programme. If you still want to lose a few kilos, my advice is to take the long-term view – ideally, starting by consulting a qualified dietitian (a member of the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute).

Mindful eating

Diet books abound promising wonderful results in minimum time with minimum effort. They are all for the birds. I have three books that should be read by anyone wanting to lose weight. The first doesn't actually promote any weight loss programme, but Brian Wansink's book "Mindless eating" outlines how simple management of our eating surroundings can help maintain a healthy appetite. For example, if the biscuits are immediately to hand, we'll eat more than if they are just a little harder to get at. Storing them in a screw-top jar will delay access by a few seconds, long enough for your brain to recall best advice on food management.

Wansink's research shows that this small delay in gratification can allow competing thought processes to kick in, leading to less treats consumed. In one study, subjects nibbled on Pringles while watching a video. For half, the Pringles were normal, but for the other half, every seventh Pringle was slightly red-coloured, just enough to jar the brain. That milli-second interruption in mindless eating caused a significant fall in how many Pringles this group consumed.

Meal planning

The second book, "The Volumetric Diet", has a meal plan for up to one month based on meals which have a low energy-

density and low calorific content. Not only is it easier to fill up with high energy-density, calorie-rich foods, but they are also fairly weak at reducing appetite some hours later. A fried breakfast has 1,400 calories, of which 30% is fat, while a typical cereal-based breakfast of 440 calories has 10% fat. Not only will the latter have fewer calories, but it will give you a greater sense of fullness for longer. Prof. Barbara Rolls (Penn State University) is a global expert on the role of energy density in developing and managing excess bodyweight, and her book is a very useful guide to meal planning with low-calorie, low energy-dense foods.

'Simple management of our eating surroundings can help maintain a healthy appetite'

Physical activity

A final must-have book for dieters is "The Step Diet" by Dr. James Hill and Dr. John Peters (Colorado State University). The book converts our body's metabolic needs for calories into "steps" and then converts food portions into steps. So rather than counting calories, he advocates counting steps. Most sedentary people have an energy output equal to about 10-15%. Hill and Peter's research shows that unless the dieter achieves at least 25% of total calorie expenditure as physical activity, long-term permanent weight loss is highly unlikely. For my height and weight, my daily target is 12,000 steps. One good walk does that.

The body has a remarkable ability to defend a given body weight and when we gain weight this is now re-set at a higher level, as per a heating thermostat. Losing weight is a constant battle against a mindless weight set point.

Short-term success is easy to achieve. Long-term weight loss isn't. Weight loss can be lost in almost the blink of an eye or so it feels to the huge majority of disappointed dieters. By all means take on weight loss, but do so with as much expert information as possible and be ready for a life of watching and counting, both calories and steps.

Mike Gibney is Professor of Food and Health at University College Dublin and the author of 'Ever Seen A Fat Fox? – Human Obesity Explored', published by UCD Press (www.ucdpress.ie)