

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a pink t-shirt and black leggings, is sitting on a gym floor and lifting two yellow dumbbells. She is smiling at the camera. In the background, there are other gym equipment and people, including a man in an orange shirt and another man in a black shirt.

In two weeks of copying men's habits Megan Johnstone lost 8 cm around her waist and hips.

DIET LIKE A MAN

Women can take a leaf from the book
of men to stay in shape

By SHANÉ BARNARD Pictures: JACQUES STANDER

MEGAN Johnstone (34) of Durbanville, Cape Town, started struggling with her weight soon after her pregnancy. Ten years later now she still hasn't reached her ideal weight despite going to the gym three times a week and knowing which foods to avoid. So why is Megan struggling to shed those extra kilos?

Megan isn't alone – many women battle to lose excess weight. According to SA Medical Research Council report 55 per cent of South African women are overweight, compared with only 28 per cent of men.

While women are often more informed about how to lose weight, men have certain physical advantages. Thanks to higher testosterone levels men have bigger muscles than women so burn about a third more calories, says Cape Town biokineticist Ivor Wright.

"Because women have higher oestrogen levels they're more inclined to store body fat," he says. The result is that men lose weight more easily than women.

But hormones aren't the only cause. Experts say women can learn from men's eating and training habits to help the extra kilos melt away more easily.

1 AVOID CRASH DIETS

"There's a lot of pressure on women to get the 'perfect body,'" says Cape Town dietician Emily Innes.

This causes women to easily fall into the crash diet trap, especially when they're always on the go.

Men are less inclined to follow strict diets and rather cut down on portions or for example avoid drinking beer for a while.

Crash diets can also make it harder to ever reach your "ideal" weight. In a study of more than

2 000 sets of twins Finnish researchers concluded that a single crash diet can increase your risk of being overweight threefold. They found that the twin who followed a crash diet increased their chances of gaining weight up to three times compared to the twin who didn't.

"Adopt a healthy lifestyle and stick to principles you can sustain for the rest of your life rather than relying on instant diets," Innes advises.

"Foster a healthy, happy relationship with food and your body."

SLEEP MORE

If you're like most women you probably lay awake during the past month on occasion while your male partner slept soundly next to you. A study by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society found women's risk of suffering from insomnia was 40 per cent greater than men's.

It's this tendency towards insomnia that can ruin women's attempts to shake off extra kilos.

Researchers at Yale University in the US found there's a direct link between sleep and weight

loss. Improved sleeping patterns could be just as important as changing your diet or exercise programme for sustained weight loss.

A study from the University of Warwick in the UK found if you slept only one hour less than you need a night your body mass index (BMI) could increase by 0,35 kg/m². This means a woman who's 1,65 m tall will weigh 1,2 kg more than someone of the same height who sleeps an hour longer every night. Most adults need seven to eight hours' sleep a night so make sure you get it if you want to keep off the weight.

Put on your running shoes instead of buying a chocolate bar

STRESS LESS

"Men and women deal with problems in different ways," says Johannesburg clinical psychologist Jeanie Cavé.

"Men are inclined to be solution driven while women tend to be emotion driven. Women are more prone to stress than men due to the way they communicate their needs."

Women also tend to experience more physical and emotional symptoms related to stress, such as headaches and depression.

Men not only stress less but handle it differently, the American Psychological Association found.

While half of women admit to eating to relieve stress, men go to the gym to bring down their stress levels.

When women try to resolve their problems at an emotional level they often treat only the symptom and not the cause.

"Women want to control their emotions first, so they do things that make them feel better and that's where comfort eating starts," Cavé says.

So rather put on your running shoes than buy a chocolate bar when you feel you're under pressure.

BUILD MUSCLE

If you walk into your local gym this afternoon chances are you'll notice the following: while women

are working up a sweat on treadmills or elliptical trainers, men are doing weights.

"Women are often scared to do even basic resistance exercises such as push-ups, not to mention working out with weights," biokineticist Ivor Wright says. "There's a misconception that weights build bulky muscles, but women's lower testosterone levels make the chances of this happening slim."

Although aerobic exercise is essential to strengthen your heart muscle, building more muscle helps you burn fat faster. Resistance exercises are also important to build women's bone density, which helps guard against osteoporosis, Wright says. "Try to include a series of resistance exercises in your exercise programme three times a week."

Two hour-long aerobic sessions a week is sufficient. This includes exercises such as walking, running, swimming or cycling.

"As soon as you can do 10 or more repetitions of a resistance exercise comfortably, increase the weight so you only just manage to complete the last two reps," Wright says. This defines your muscles rather than builds bulk.

REMEMBER

These tips don't suggest you can tuck into favourite fast foods such as pizza or hamburgers whenever you have a craving. The same principle applies, whether you're a man or woman: if you want to lose weight you have to combine a regular exercise programme with consuming just enough energy to suit your specific needs. This includes eating a healthy balance of protein, carbohydrates and fat in the correct proportions.

ENOUGH WITH PERFECTION

You relented. An intense task landed on your desk just before five so you went out to buy a packet of crisps. And ate it. What happens next? You criticise yourself, possibly for days on end. And your health plan goes out the window.

Women are past masters at self-criticism, psychologist Jeanie Cavé says. Rather try to expend this energy in a positive way. "If you love your body you'll do your best to look after it in a healthy way."

Then there's also the notion of the elephant in the room. "As soon as you know you should avoid a certain food, such as chocolate, you immediately feel like having some."

Women are more inclined to fall into this so-called paradox trap than men, she says.

"Slavishly following a diet is a recipe for disaster. Instead of focusing on what you've done wrong, focus on health, lifestyle and self-care. This is a much more effective way to maintain a healthy relationship with food."

EAT MORE PROTEIN

What did you have for lunch? A juicy steak or a crisp salad with plenty of leaves and vegetables? If you had steak you're probably a man.

Protein has the advantage that it makes you feel full, which is why men are also less inclined to snack on sweets.

Women who lead a hectic lifestyle often find it hard to include enough protein in their diet, dietician Emily Innes says, so try to include a healthy source of protein such as chicken, lean meat, eggs, pulses, low-fat cheese or fish in every meal. "You don't have to suddenly eat huge steaks or have protein drinks."

And when you have a craving for chocolate rather have a fruit with a handful of nuts or two teaspoons of nut butter.

MEGAN FOLLOWS IN THE MEN'S FOOTSTEPS

Capetonian Megan Johnstone followed these weight-loss tips for two weeks and kept a diary of her experience.

With the help of her personal trainer she followed an exercise programme compiled by Cape Town biokineticist Ivor Wright.

She had to do a series of resistance exercises four times a week. "Initially the exercises nearly killed me," Megan says. But as her strength increased the exercises became easier and she even started to enjoy them.

Megan included a healthy source of protein such as eggs, avocado, fish and lean meat with every meal and

snacked on yoghurt and fruit during the day, especially after a hard workout left her starving. Most evenings she was tired from the exercises so went to bed early.

Megan lost 1,5 kg in the first two weeks and a total of 8 cm around her waist and hips.

Although she cheated a few times she says she learnt a lot. "I realised how sugar dependent I was," she says. "Whenever I felt upset or emotional I'd immediately crave chocolate but I opted for a fruit or small fruit juice instead."

