



From the office biscuit tin to email culture, we look at the work traps that can too easily contribute to weight gain - and how to overcome them



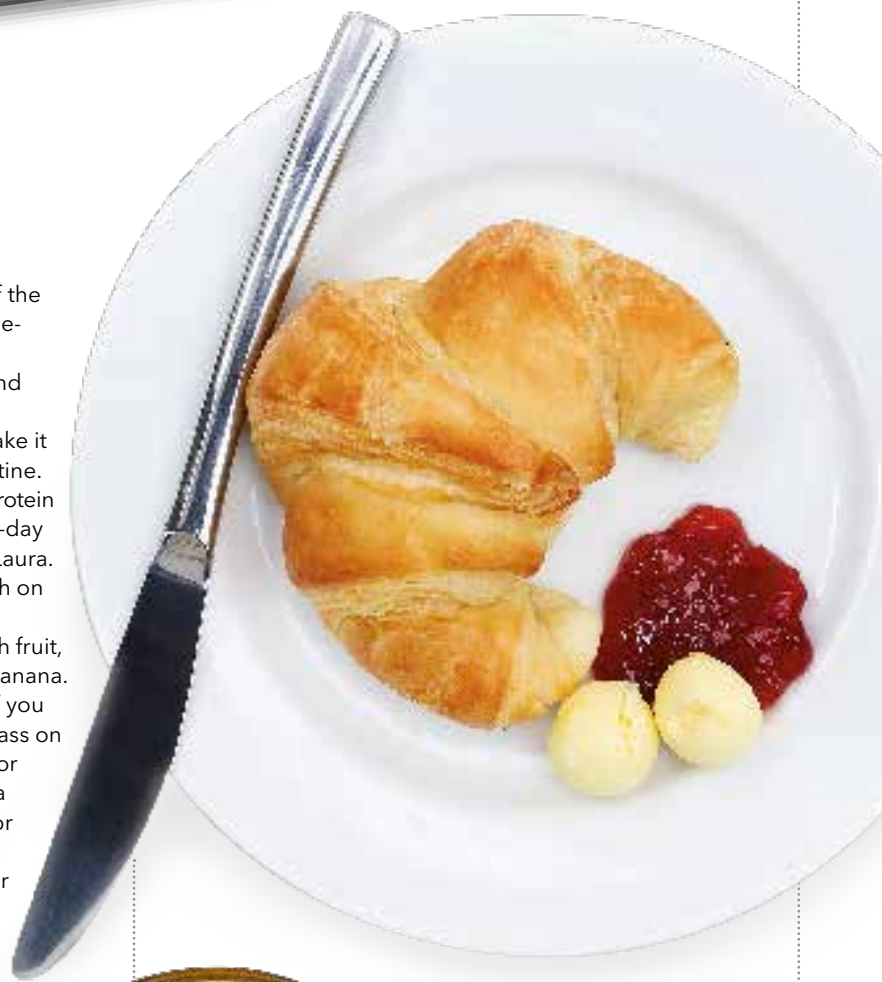
SKIPPING BREAKFAST

When your alarm sounds each morning it's tempting to hit the snooze button. But if that extra 10 minutes' nap comes at the expense of a healthy breakfast, you're making your first mistake of the day. 'There's good evidence to show the people who find it easier to control their weight are breakfast eaters,' says dietitian Laura Clark (lecnutrition.co.uk). 'Breakfast kickstarts our metabolism for the day. It also makes us less likely to reach for sugary or fatty snacks like that Danish pastry or blueberry muffin mid-morning, as we desperately try to boost low blood-sugar levels.'



HOW TO `esc` IT Get out of the mindset that breakfast is a time-consuming luxury. Think of it as a way to increase energy and concentration and help you manage your weight - and make it a priority in your morning routine. 'Ideally, include wholegrains, protein and at least one of your five-a-day of fruit and vegetables,' says Laura. Try poached eggs and spinach on rye bread, bircher muesli with low-fat yogurt, seeds and fresh fruit, or a nut butter on toast plus banana.

Running late? No problem. 'If you have to grab food en route, pass on muffins or croissants and go for a porridge pot with fresh fruit, a low-fat, low-sugar cereal bar or a smoothie,' says Laura. Most coffee shops now sell healthier options, or you could nip into a supermarket and DIY. If your office has a kitchen, why not keep porridge sachets or a box of wholegrain cereal at work? →





WORKING LATE

Studies have established the link between working overtime and weight gain. One study revealed a third of employees regularly putting in extra hours gained as much as 15kg over 28 years. The connection might not seem obvious, but think about how overtime messes with your eating routine. 'Long hours usually mean skipped dinners, high-calorie snacking and grabbing a takeaway or ready meal on the way home because you're too shattered to cook,' says Laura.

HOW TO ESC IT It's one thing for your boss to expect you to work late, but quite another for them to expect you to go hungry. 'Make sure you break for dinner at a reasonable hour,' says Laura. 'If needs be, pop out to a supermarket or healthier café to buy food for later. If you know in advance you're going to be working late, or it's a regular occurrence, get into the habit of making extra portions of meals when you're at home, and bring them in to microwave at work.' Not all ready meals are bad, either - look for the green traffic light logo on packaging.



UNHEALTHY LUNCH HABITS

There are three main lunch pitfalls. The first is skipping lunch altogether when you're busy. 'Cue an afternoon energy slump, biscuit binge and unhealthy choices before or at dinner,' says Laura.

The second is what you eat. Most of us buy lunch at least a couple of times a week, rather than bringing in a packed lunch. 'But shop-bought sandwiches can be laden with butter, mayonnaise or creamy salad dressings and be really calorific,' says Laura.

The third pitfall is the way you eat. 'If you shove a sandwich down while multitasking, your brain won't even



8pm and you're still at the office? That explains the biscuit overdose...

register you've eaten,' she says. 'When you're distracted you're more likely to eat quickly and overeat.'

HOW TO ESC IT Allow one day a week to buy lunch, but bring it from home on other days. 'If you don't have time to make it, bring in supplies: wholegrain bread, tinned tuna in water, tomato, cucumber, lettuce and low-fat cheese can be kept in the work fridge to make your own lunch,' says Laura. 'You can also use them to supplement lunches you buy that aren't as nutritionally balanced as you'd like. When you do need to buy your lunch, many cafés and takeaway outlets now show the calorie count of their products on the shelves or on menu panels.' In general, sushi packs and wholegrain sandwiches are good choices (but watch the salt in sushi). Steer clear of mayo-filled white rolls and subs, veg-poor creamy pasta salads, pies and pastries.



FEELING STRESSED

When our bodies release a flood of stress hormones into the bloodstream - including cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline - blood glucose and insulin levels are raised, which in turn promotes fat storage.

'Stress may also lead to weight gain by triggering comfort eating and poorer food and lifestyle choices,' says Cary Cooper, professor of organised psychology and health at Lancaster University and co-author of *How To Deal With Stress* (£9.99, Kogan Page).

HOW TO ESC IT Reducing stress levels is easier said than done - anyone who's suffered chronic work stress will know having a massage or taking a lavender bath doesn't quite cut it. 'But such measures can help by allowing you to relax just enough to think more clearly,' says Cary. 'The only real way to escape the damaging effects of stress is to identify what's causing it, then take control. If a bad relationship with your

'Make healthier after-work plans: if you have to get to a zumba class you won't be lured into the pub'

boss is stressing you out, for example, no amount of dieting is going to help. You need to work on changing the relationship - or your job.'

If you know you're an emotional eater or drinker at times of stress, plan ahead to reduce your opportunities to do so. Don't keep unhealthy foods to hand, and make healthier after-work arrangements with friends. If you've got to get to the gym for zumba or are meeting a friend for a cuppa, you won't be lured into the pub by colleagues or go home and raid the fridge.



MINDLESS EATING

When you're frantically busy, food hardly enters your mind. But spend hours on tedious tasks and you'll often find yourself reaching for anything edible. And with people bringing in birthday cakes, biscuits or other treats to share, the office is a danger zone. 'It's well documented that when food is made readily accessible, you'll eat more,' says Laura. In one US study, workers of a healthy weight were given chocolates either on their desks or two metres away. You can guess the results: the staff with the chocolates on their desks ate more of them each day than those who had to get up and walk to them.

And let's not forget mindlessly consuming coffee-shop drinks with their copious amounts of full-fat milk, sugar or syrup. 'They're bigger than you'd make yourself, and even a skinny drink could have 100 calories,' says Laura. 'Yet research has shown we don't allow for empty drink calories by eating less throughout the day.'

HOW TO `esc` IT 'The first rule is to keep food out of sight - and out of mind,' Laura advises. 'Leave fruit and water on your

desk, but put everything else in a drawer or the kitchen. Stock up on healthy snacks such as small packets of dried fruit, unsalted nuts and seeds or natural popcorn.'

Get colleagues on board by suggesting you all stop bringing in biscuits to share - or that those who want them keep them out of sight in a shared cupboard. Or go for treats like a colourful fruit platter. 'It's OK to indulge sometimes - the occasional treat is part of a balanced diet,' says Laura. 'Have a piece of cake when it's someone's birthday, but go for half your normal size.'

When it comes to drinks, think of how much money you'll save by opting out of the coffee run. Switch to making your own and, even if you only had one takeout coffee a day, you could save £10-£15 a week. That'll soon add up to a new outfit to show off your slimmer figure. →

THE TECHNOLOGY TRAP

Professor Cary Cooper recently carried out research for ITV1's *Tonight* programme. He took charge of a large technology-based company in Manchester for a week, and employees were forbidden to email anyone in the same building or to use any work-related technology after 5:30pm. 'So they couldn't fire up the laptop once they got home or keep a check on work emails,' he explains. The result? 'The office came alive with people talking in groups, having face-to-face conversations and actually moving from one place to another. I'm in no doubt such a policy would have psychological and physical health benefits over time.'

'Technology is useful, but make sure you control it, not the other way around,' he advises. 'Avoid being on call all day and night by designating specific times to check emails and return calls. During your downtime, limit technology use. If you're on Facebook all evening, consider that as time you could be spending cooking a healthy meal with your partner or doing exercise.'



SITTING DOWN ALL DAY

How often have you phoned or emailed a colleague who works on the floor above you – or even sits across the room from you – when you could get up and visit them instead?

Is this really such a problem? Yes, says Australian research that shows the more often you take breaks, the lower your waist circumference and BMI is likely to be. The simple act of standing can double your metabolic rate. Sitting down also hinders circulation of the fat-absorbing enzyme lipase, causing fat to circulate in the blood, clogging up arteries and increasing fat stores.

And let's not forget 'desk derriere'. A recent lab study at Tel Aviv University looked at mice cells exposed to different conditions and concluded that the buttock muscles of inactive office workers may be shrinking and breaking down as a result of underuse, while fat cells accumulate twice as fast. Whether or not we accept the link, it's certainly clear that moving around makes it easier to maintain a healthy weight.

'Sitting for hours causes muscles in the back and glutes to overstretch, while our abdominals and hip flexors shorten, leading to muscle imbalances and back pain,' explains physiotherapist Liz Ebelthite (marplephysio.com). 'When we then head out for exercise, we're more likely to tear ligaments, strain hamstrings or suffer lower back pain – and end up more inactive than we started.'

HOW TO ESC IT 'Build more activity into your day,' says Liz. 'Could you offset a sedentary job by walking or cycling all or part of the way to and from work? Or could you go for a brisk walk or take an exercise class at lunchtime?'

Get up from your desk at every opportunity, whether to make coffee or have a face-to-face chat with those colleagues you

'Talk face to face with your colleagues. Simply standing can double your metabolic rate'

normally call or email. 'Take the stairs, not the lift (two at a time will really engage your glutes!) and stand to make phone calls,' she adds. There are even exercises you can do at your desk, such as buttock clenches, shoulder rolls and ankle circles. Part of the problem is that we get absorbed in work and forget to move. For regular reminders, follow the Twitter bot @officeworkout, which tweets simple at-desk moves every 30 minutes. Or download a free screen-break prompt tool, such as Big Stretch Reminder (monkeymatt.com/bigstretch).



THE OFFICE PARTY

Friday night drinks, birthdays, leaving parties, corporate lunches and conference cuisine all mean unnecessary calories in the form of alcohol, cakes, three-course meals, buffets and endless supplies of unhealthy finger food. These occasions are a particular trap for people who usually limit their intake of cakes, biscuits and sweets. By seeing them as forbidden in everyday life, you may eat more when exposed to them. This is fine if special occasions are just that (special and occasional), but if you work in one of those places where there always seems to be some sort of shindig or working lunch on offer, the weight can start to creep on.

HOW TO ESC IT 'From now on, your mantra needs to be "plan ahead",' says Laura. 'If you know you've got a lunch or party that's going to up your calorie count, make the other meals that day more modest. At the buffet, check out everything that's on offer before you start filling your plate – that way you'll only

You'll save calories and money by swapping the coffee shop latte for a custom-made office brew



choose what you really fancy. Even if it's finger food, take what you want, then move away from the bowl or table.'

The same goes for canapés. 'I advise people to take a second out to think before they pop something in their mouth,' says Laura. 'Think about your weight-loss goal and whether this particular mouthful is worth it. If it is, fine - savour it and don't feel guilty. If it's not, say no and you'll feel all the better for it.'

It's easy to drink too much at functions, too, so alternate alcoholic drinks with water and don't let other people top up your glass - that's the surest way to lose track of what you've consumed.



BUSINESS TRIPS

Travelling for work can throw your entire routine into disarray. 'Healthy food options aren't always available in service stations, train stations and airports,' says Laura. 'Hotel food can be rich and minibar snacks salty, full of fat and calories and oversized. And those all-you-can-eat breakfasts are a healthy eater's nemesis.' Add in hectic schedules that mess up your preferred mealtimes and leave little time for exercise, and it's no wonder all your good intentions go out of the window.

HOW TO esc IT Be prepared: take snacks with you in the car and train or on the plane; find out about the food outlets at your destination; call the hotel beforehand with any special dietary requests; and ask them to clear your minibar in advance. 'Don't get into the mentality that you're helpless and there's nothing you can do when travelling,' says Laura. 'It's simply not true. Remember, you're the customer, so at mealtimes

'Be prepared: take snacks with you in the car or train and find out about the food outlets at your destination'

NEW HOME OFFICE RULES

Whether you work at home or you're a full-time parent, you're not immune to workplace weight traps - especially with a fully stocked kitchen at your disposal...

- Set yourself a traditional eight-hour day. Make sure you're dressed and ready to go by the time your working day starts (whether it's in your home office or doing household duties) - no more typing on the sofa in your PJs.

- Get out of the house before work, at lunchtime and at the end of your day,

even if it's just to go to the post office. This helps mark the divide between work and home. A brisk walk with your children or the dog is ideal.

- Schedule times for lunch, plus morning and afternoon tea breaks, to avoid all-day grazing (or skipping lunch, then bingeing by 3pm).

- Think of the time you save commuting to an office as your exercise time.



you can decline the butter, ask for more vegetables or dressings on the side, request fruit salad for dessert if it's not on the menu and have plates cleared as soon as you've finished so you don't carry on picking. These sorts of changes can make a significant difference to your daily calorie count.'

Always pack your gym gear and swimsuit, too. Most hotels have gyms or pools, or find a short circuit to walk or run around first thing in the morning.