

Affordable ways to lose weight

Shedding pounds doesn't have to mean shelling out a lot of money. These programs get results—at a great price. *by* RICHARD LALIBERTE



Amber Schalansky had struggled with her weight since she was 10 years old. “Over the years, I tried every program you can think of,” says the 33-year-old from Sacramento, CA. “It usually involved paying for food or a plan, but nothing worked long-term.”

Amber was discouraged by the money she’d spent on programs until her mother told her about a website called *SparkPeople.com* where, for free, she found a supportive community plus food and exercise tracking tools. “Stress is a big trigger for me, so if I wanted to dive into a bag of chips, I went online to SparkPeople and someone talked me out of it,” says Amber, who went from 330 pounds to 147 in two years. “My life’s completely changed.”

Anyone who’s tried to lose weight can tell you it’s no piece of cake, which is why so many dieters turn to structured programs. But effective plans don’t have to be pricey. Try one of these low- to no-cost approaches to losing weight, all of which provide the tools, resources and support you need. →

If you want to be discreet

TRY An online program **\$ COST** Free



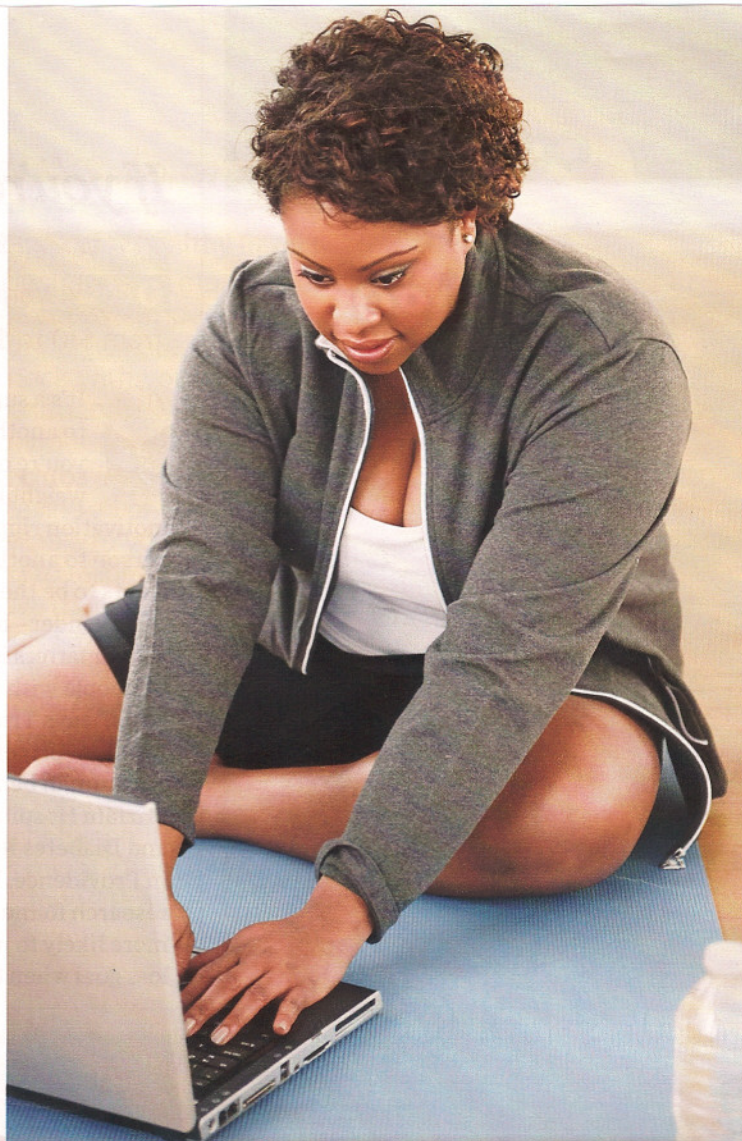
"Stepping on a scale or talking about my weight in front of other people is intimidating and embarrassing," says Amber. "It's not for everyone." Research backs her up. In a recent study, people who went online to share weight loss stories and find encouragement and information said that the convenience and relative anonymity of the Internet made online programs uniquely valuable. "Online, I don't feel I'm being judged by people looking at me," Amber says.

Where to go

SparkPeople.com's one-stop site provides personalized meal and fitness plans, recipes and videos. Popular features include a directory of nutritional information, weight trackers and groups called "SparkTeams" organized around a variety of topics, including how to break out of a plateau or lose weight as a vegetarian.

"You can access what you need at home or work at any time of day, online or by

mobile," says Karen Spencer, 52, of Hercules, CA, who lost 105 pounds using videos of exercise demos and the SparkPeople tool for tracking calorie intake. The 24/7 availability is particularly useful for instant help or encouragement: Post on the site's *Panic! Button* forum and you receive immediate advice. Sharing on the *Woo-Hoo! Button* board garners cheers for a success. You can also choose to make your profile anonymous or public.



If you're a team player

TRY A support group **\$ COST** A one-time fee of \$28, then \$2 to \$5 per month (varies by location)



"Group meetings give me motivation and promote accountability," says Stephanie Garcia, 45, of Kansas City, MO, who lost 105 pounds using a program called TOPS (Taking Off Pounds Sensibly). "Knowing I wasn't doing it alone helped me stick with it." Staying connected is a key reason support groups work. One study found that people who attended up to 26 group weight loss sessions over a year generally lost up to 15 pounds, whereas people who tried to shed pounds on their own lost little or no weight. "My TOPS family wouldn't let me get discouraged if I gained a little weight back," says Stephanie. "Their support motivated me and encouraged me to keep going. I'll forever be grateful for that."

Where to go

Consider joining one of the 10,000 worldwide chapters of TOPS (tops.org). What's unique about this program is that there's no formal diet or exercise plan—the focus is all on the support. TOPS provides a guidebook and steers members to an eating plan developed by the American Diabetes Association and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (it lists how many carbs, dairy products, fruits, fats and sweets you can eat daily) as well as the USDA nutrition guidelines.

But dieters do have the flexibility to try different plans. "Some TOPS members count

calories, some count carbs, some just exercise," says Sally Myers, who lost 42 pounds using TOPS and started Stephanie's group, which meets weekly at the law firm where they both work. "You're able to find a healthy eating and exercise plan that fits your lifestyle, which is key to making sure the weight stays off."

The support doesn't end when you reach your number. Once Stephanie lost 105 pounds, she joined KOPS (Keep Off Pounds Sensibly). Several times a year, she meets with other KOPS members to discuss maintenance struggles and share tips.

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If you're driven to win

TRY A weight loss contest

COST Varies by program
from \$10 to \$60, or free



It's a support group taken to another level: When you're on a team in a weight loss competition, motivation ripples from one person to another and no one wants to be the weakest link. "Age, gender—none of it matters. What matters is being surrounded by people with similar health goals," says Tricia Leahey, PhD, assistant professor of psychiatry and human behavior at the Miriam Hospital's Weight Control and Diabetes Research Center in Providence, RI. Dr. Leahey's research found that people were more likely to meet a 5% weight loss goal when their teammates

were also losing weight.

"When you're trying to manage weight on your own, it's easy to say, 'I don't care today,'" says Anna Rodriguez, 40, of Atlanta, who lowered her BMI from 40 to 29 in the past year by participating in two 12-week programs through *HealthyWage.com*, a company that organizes contests in which you can win money for shedding pounds. "But when people are depending on you, it really makes you think twice about doing anything counterproductive to weight loss," says Anna.

The one downside to a short-term challenge? "At the end of the competition, you want to splurge," she says. "Without the structure, everybody gains a little weight back afterward." Her solution: Form teams with friends and family members you

GET PAID TO lose weight?

For some people, the possibility of earning money to lose weight is a big jumpstart. *HealthyWage.com* offers a free challenge that pays you \$100 to bring your BMI (body mass index) from obese (above 30) to healthy (below 25) in one year. The money comes from sponsors who want to connect with people who are making healthy lifestyle changes. Putting \$300 of your money on the line boosts the prize to \$1,000.

"I'm a money-motivated person and that really spiked my interest," says Rose Stutzman, 44, of Erie, PA, who went from 189 to 159 pounds in six months. "You're betting on yourself and the outcome is up to you," she says.



Signs that a program that pays is legit:

- ▶ There's an email or phone number for someone who can answer your questions and responds quickly.
- ▶ Your weigh-ins are verified and sent from a third party, such as your doctor or a fitness center.
- ▶ A public presence on Facebook or Twitter makes the program more accountable. Interact with the followers—ask questions on their Facebook page and see what members say about their experiences.

Red flag:
The program should *never* require you to purchase food, supplements, clothing or other products.

know well so you can keep in touch once the competition is over and motivate one another to continue. "My team members have given me more support to keep going than my workout buddies," says Anna.

Where to go

Anna used HealthyWage's most popular program: Each person pays \$60 to join, then teams of five are pitted against one another for cash winnings. Anna's team took a \$3,000 third prize, or \$600 per teammate. (Before and after weigh-ins sent from your doctor's office or a fitness center keep everyone honest.) "I've gained and lost weight a number of times, but I was never able to go slow and keep it off like I have doing HealthyWage," says Anna. At WeightLossWars.com, you can set up your own contest or join someone else's for a \$10 fee. Teams can be anything from couples to hundreds of people, but friend or workplace groups of 10 to 50 are typical. You can set the rules and prize (money, an object or nothing).

MORE WAYS to save—and lose

► Get price breaks for healthy habits

Many health insurance companies offer lower rates or copays to people who lose weight or participate in health programs. Check with your employer's benefits department or with your insurance provider to see if you qualify.

► Use fitness clubs à la carte

Rather than having all of the club's amenities available to you, some clubs may be willing to tailor a membership so you can save money if you only use certain facilities, says Meredith Poppler, spokesperson for the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association.

► Customize your gym membership

Ask about discounts for using the facilities during off-peak hours. "If the gym is empty between 10 A.M. and 2 P.M., the managers might offer special rates for only going then," Poppler says.

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