



a little weight-loss treat

As we celebrate the festive season, spare a thought for how you “celebrate” your good health. Rewarding your achievements, whether large or small, can be a great way to develop and support a healthy lifestyle.

Used consistently and correctly, rewards can help reinforce good habits and encourage actions that produce results. What’s more, there’s no better time than Christmas to address the kinds of rewards that we use to celebrate our life and its achievements.

a positive focus

Health and fitness can sometimes be associated with pain (think “no pain, no gain”) or avoiding negatives (“I need to exercise so that I won’t get fat”). This can also involve a constant battle, dealing with your inner voice that nags at you to stop being lazy or keeps urging you to achieve perfection. Feelings of guilt, shame and self-loathing are not uncommon. But this kind of motivation is rarely successful over the long term.

A rewards-based incentive is far more motivating. Positive reinforcement can be a constant, driving force that will help you achieve your healthy lifestyle goals. It’s a way to offer yourself support and encouragement, even if it’s for the many baby steps that you’ll need to achieve certain milestones.

Done correctly, rewards can help reframe your mind such that a healthy lifestyle becomes less about receiving prizes and more about enjoying the process, creating a feeling of doing something because you *want* to, not because you *have* to.

what rewards are best?

The thought of celebration often goes hand in hand with food and drink, especially around Christmas time. But for the health-conscious, this can sabotage your good work.

For example, a slice of Christmas cake may *feel* well-deserved, but it can take 40 minutes of walking to burn off the kilojoules you got from it. Choosing the right kind of rewards is vital. You can treat yourself without overindulging,

doing such things as taking a hot bath or buying some flowers for your living room, a magazine or a DVD.

Even better is to reward yourself with things that will actually help you get results, such as a massage, a personal training session, new running shoes, a healthy recipe book or new workout gear. Bigger rewards that may be suited to larger achievements could include a treadmill, a trekking holiday, a healthy-cooking class or a mountain bike.

how to use rewards

To set up a system of rewards that can motivate you to lose body fat, start by writing down some short-term goals. Make sure they are challenging yet achievable. They also need to focus on the process rather than the outcome.

Short-term process goals such as “walk five days this week” will help you to maintain control over your achievements, whereas long-term outcome goals, such as “lose 10 kilograms in the next 12 months,” are vulnerable to things beyond your control. That’s why

it's important to reward the process and not just the result.

Once you've recorded your short-term process goals, write down the actions needed to achieve them and a suitable reward you can give yourself once you've reached them. Choose rewards that mean something to you, that you know will inspire you and keep you on track. It's also important to make sure your rewards are realistic and achievable; otherwise they can be demotivating.

beware of over rewarding

Exercise not only depletes your body of kilojoules; it can also deplete your self-control. People often feel angelic after a workout, but this halo effect may lead to indulging on food-related rewards. This is termed postworkout-reward syndrome, a phenomenon in which people binge on unhealthy foods after exercise, negating the weight-loss benefits of their activity.

In reality, postworkout-reward syndrome may be just as much a psychological response to exercise as it is a physiological hunger response. People may feel that they deserve a reward after exercise. In other words, when you feel great after completing a workout, it's harder to resist food temptations and treats afterwards.

While regular exercise may allow you the occasional extra indulgence, don't make it a habit. Get to know how many kilojoules are in the foods you eat (which may be more than you think) and how many kilojoules you're expending during exercise (which may be fewer than you think).

eight tips for effective rewards

Following are eight strategies to help ensure that the reward system you choose will be effective.

1. Choose rewards that mean something to you

Think carefully about the kinds of incentives to best reward yourself with over the short and long term. It's best if the rewards can help rather than hinder your progress, but ultimately, it's got to be a genuine motivator. It will work better if it really means something to you.

2. Occasionally delay your rewards

If you've found some of your rewards a little easy to come by, why not delay them or change the rules a little? Be honest with yourself and realise that it may take time to find the right balance between making a reward achievable and making it challenging.

3. Ease back on your reward over time

An ideal time to use rewards is when you begin to change your lifestyle. It's important to have something to aim for, especially when the transition from your old lifestyle is difficult. As your body adapts to healthy eating and regular exercise, the sense of accomplishment and a boosted energy level will become a reward in itself. Then ease back on using rewards for motivation.

4. Involve others in your rewards

Inviting your partner, co-workers, friends or family to share in your reward system can add a whole new level of motivation. Ask others to aspire to a similar reward, such as a spa treatment after completing a half-marathon. Sharing rewards with your training partner can further boost your commitment both to the exercise and to each other.

5. Re-evaluate your rewards

Every month or two, review your goals, progress and rewards system. Ask yourself whether it's working. Is it still motivating and are you heading in the right direction? This review gives you the opportunity to either ramp things up or take things back a notch, depending on the level of results you've

obtained. Take strength from your successes and learn from your mistakes.

6. Use financial incentives

Money can be a great way to reward yourself. For example, you can put a dollar in a jar every time you complete a workout. Each time the total reaches \$50 or \$100, you can treat yourself to a gift card at your favourite store.

7. Keep food rewards to a minimum

There are some occasions, such as Christmas and birthdays, where food-related rewards and treats are all but impossible to avoid. So if you must indulge, do so with small portions. Eat slowly, savour every mouthful and enjoy a sliver, not a slab.

8. Discover other forms of motivation

While rewards can be a great source of motivation, it helps to have a plan B. Consider using additional sources of motivation, such as a training journal, a training partner, listening to music while you work out and cross training (where you constantly vary your training routine).

As you keep to these strategies, you'll notice your reward system changing your habits and your biggest reward will be a healthier, better you! ↻

examples of a rewards system

Long term goal

Lose 10 kilograms in 12 months.

Actions needed

- 1 Weigh in on January 1 and 12 months later on December 31.
- 2 Measure monthly, and alter the plan where necessary.
- 3 Follow your short-term goals.

🎁 **Reward:** Take a beachside holiday.

Short term goal 1

Walk or run 5 days each week.

Actions needed

- 1 Buy a pedometer.
- 2 Have clothes ready each morning.
- 3 Use a portable music player.
- 4 Practise walking faster in short bursts.

🎁 **Reward:** Get a massage every 8 weeks.



Short term goal 2

Eat smaller portions at night.

Actions needed

- 1 Use smaller plates.
- 2 Plan meals in advance.
- 3 Take a list when I shop.
- 4 Eat slowly.

🎁 **Reward:** Buy a healthy recipe book every 12 weeks.



Short term goal 3

Drink 8 glasses of water daily.

Actions needed

- 1 Keep a water bottle in the car.
- 2 Keep a water bottle at my desk.
- 3 Note how much water I've had each day.
- 4 Drink water with dinner.

🎁 **Reward:** Get a \$50 gift card at an exercise or sporting goods store every 12 weeks.

