

The shops have replenished all the empty shelves now. I went to buy a birthday card, and the shop had replaced all the Christmas cards with Valentine's ones. Hurry, hurry, only 29 days to go.

The food shops are the most interesting and the only ones I can justify visiting at the moment. They have reduced the price of all the tins of chocolates and the olive and coffee gift sets. Not the malt whisky though, which I guess will keep for another year.

The empty spaces have been filled with healthy foods; packs with green dots on them and 'towards your five-a-day' emblazoned on the front. Slimming foods and healthy bars are everywhere. Newspapers and magazines are full of diet plans and exercise programmes.

I've only just got over being the hostess with the mostess, creating stunning meals full of butter and cream. Now I am being encouraged to rustle up tasty meals that help us all to lose those holiday pounds that have mysteriously wrapped around our waists. Depending on where my advice comes from I have to reduce calories, carbs, or fat. Alternatively, I could practice food combining or feed the family on nothing but special diet milkshakes.

There are pills you can take that stop you feeling hungry, or you can achieve the same effect by drinking a pint of water before your meal or filling up on melon or bran or short grain brown rice.

You can detoxify your liver, your kidneys or your skin, all of which have the side effect of reducing your weight. I must admit I am strangely attracted by the thought of being able to simply flush away all my excesses of the last few weeks.

Most of the literature promises to restore my body in one month to the state in was in a god twenty years ago. It would be a miracle diet indeed if it could so quickly reverse the years of indulgence and over-eating I have been enjoying for so long.

Of course, woman cannot reduce by diet alone. There is the necessary exercise to go along with it, and for this there is even more choice. From walking the dog to boxing, there is no end to how I can shed those extra pounds. But how best to do it? Spinning is quite in vogue around here, but you do get a bit sweaty and all that enthusiasm tends to have the opposite effect on me. I enjoy yoga, but have been too ashamed to go back after the relaxation snoring incident.

Some books tell you that weight training is the way forward so that your body keeps on burning calories even when you are flat out on the sofa. Other books tell you to run, swim, cycle or dance. You are better to work out in a gym or in the outdoors, with a friend or in a group, every day, every alternate day or three times a week.

I even saw a book that advises me that just watching their exercise DVD can have positive benefits.

Men do not escape from the pressure either. Someone in the office has been admiring the 'top ten torsos' of 2008 in her magazine (it's always someone else that reads these things, never me). I am sure the Atkins diet and spinning were specifically designed for the macho male market, although I know of more than one man who attends the lycra-clad lady-filled exercise classes at the hall.

And this is actually what real-life is like. We may all aspire to personal trainers and pilates classes, but the reality is often just whatever is on offer at the village hall or in daily life. Every day on my way to work, I pass a retired gent who walks to the next village to buy his paper. He could buy one closer to home, but

maybe he enjoys the daily walk. My brother-in-law spends all day on the hill with sheep or fence posts and has never seen an exercise class in his life, although he sees off most of the opposition at the annual hill race in the summer.

Spare a thought, though, for the January Joiner, who takes up all the space in the class or gym in January, only to revert to couch potato when the New Year resolution fad wears off.