

Weight Management: How to Reach a Healthy Weight



If you want to get to a healthy weight and stay there, healthy lifestyle changes will work better than dieting. These three steps can help.

- **Improve your eating habits.** It's best to do this slowly. You will be more successful if you work on changing one eating habit at a time.
- **Get active.** Regular activity can help you feel better, have more energy, and burn more calories.
- **Change your thinking.** Your thoughts have a lot to do with how you feel and what you do. You'll have more success at making lifestyle changes if you first change the way you think.

Weight is only one part of your health. Even if you carry some extra weight, healthy eating and being more active can help you feel better, have more energy, and lower your risk for health problems.

Improve your eating habits

Instead of going on a diet, make healthy changes that you can stay with over time.

Healthy eating, combined with getting active, is more likely than dieting to help you reach and stay at a healthy weight. Eating a healthy variety of foods is a lot more satisfying than following a strict diet that leaves you feeling deprived and hungry.

Listen to your body

Young children are good at listening to their bodies. They eat when they're hungry and stop when they're full. But adults may ignore these signals. You may keep eating after you're full, or you may eat because you're bored or upset.

Be aware of body signals that tell you when and how much to eat:

- **Hunger** is a normal sensation that makes you want to eat. Your body tells your brain that your stomach is empty.
- **Fullness** is the feeling of being satisfied. Your stomach tells your brain that you're full.
- **Appetite** is the desire for the taste and pleasure of food.

Some things cause you to eat when you're not really hungry. If you know what these eating triggers are, you can avoid them.

Stress is a very common trigger. You can learn ways to manage stress and eating. Other common eating triggers include certain smells or sights, social situations, and emotions like boredom or loneliness.

Control your portions

The portions served in restaurants are usually much larger than what you need. Cutting back your portions can help you reach or stay at a healthy weight, without giving up your favorite foods.

Choose your food sensibly

All foods, if eaten in moderation, can be part of healthy eating. Eat a variety of foods from each food group. Include grains, vegetables, fruits,

milk, and meat and other proteins, including beans. Remember to:

- Limit foods high in fat, sugar, and calories.
- Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables.
- Plan your meals ahead of time. You'll be less likely to grab something convenient that's not as healthy.

Get more active

Try to make physical activity a regular, fun part of your life. Physical activity helps you burn more calories.

For weight loss, experts advise doing moderate activity for at least 5 hours a week. If you have not exercised much in the past, your doctor might first suggest a small amount of daily aerobic activity. Build up your exercise program bit by bit, and aim for 60 to 90 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week. This can help you lose weight and keep it off.

There are lots of ways to fit activity into your life.

- Walk or bike to the store.
- Walk the dog or meet a friend for a walk.
- Read a newspaper on a stationary bike.
- Mow the lawn, rake leaves, shovel snow, or do some gardening.
- Use the stairs instead of the elevator, at least for a few floors.

Talk to your doctor

Moderate physical activity is safe for most people. But it's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before becoming more active,

especially if you haven't been very active or you have health problems.

Change your thinking

When you're trying to reach a healthy weight, changing how you think about certain things may help. Here are some ideas:

- Don't compare yourself to others. Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes.
- Pay attention to how hungry or full you feel. When you eat, be aware of why you're eating and how much you're eating.
- Don't focus on dieting. Dieting almost never works over the long term.
- Focus on improving your health instead of dieting.

To find success at making lifestyle changes:

- **Have your own reason.** If you make changes because someone else wants you to, you're less likely to succeed.
- **Set goals.** Include long-term goals and short-term goals that you can measure easily.
- **Measure improvements to your health.** For example, keep track of your blood pressure, cholesterol, or blood sugar. Or see how you can shorten the time it takes to walk a mile.
- **Think about what might get in your way,** and prepare for those barriers.
- **Get support** from your family, your doctor, your friends—and support yourself.

Weight Management: Healthy Eating



The best way to manage your weight is through healthy eating and being physically active. This means eating plenty of fruits and vegetables and choosing lean meats, nonfat and low-fat dairy products, and whole grains. It also means limiting sweet liquids, such as soda, fruit drinks, and sport drinks. And it means eating less fat, sugar, and highly processed foods.

Try to make fitness a habit. Limiting the time you spend at the computer or watching TV helps you stay active.

You do not have to make big changes at once. Think about some of the things—parties, eating out, temptations—that might get in the way of your success. Then, think about the changes you can make right away.

If you need help managing your weight, ask your doctor about talking to a registered dietitian. He or she can help you change eating habits.

What is a calorie?

The protein, carbohydrates, and fats you get from food give your body energy. This energy keeps your heart beating, your brain active, and

your muscles working. Energy is measured in calories. For example, a food that has 500 calories provides more energy to your body than a food with 200 calories.

Your body needs a certain number of calories each day for you to function and keep doing your daily activities. After your body meets its needs, it stores extra calories as fat. Your weight remains steady when your body takes in the same amount of calories that it burns. To lose weight, you have to use up more calories than you take in.

How do carbohydrates, fat, and fiber affect you?

Fat is a very dense source of energy. It has more than twice the calories per gram than protein or carbohydrate. Cutting back on fat is the best way to reduce the total number of calories in your diet. Animal foods such as meats and dairy products can be a source of hidden fats. Try to choose lean or low-fat versions of these products. Use smaller amounts of fats like butter, margarine, salad dressing, and mayonnaise. These fats can add a lot of calories to your diet.

Fiber helps to keep the digestive tract healthy. It helps to keep blood sugar levels stable and control cholesterol.

It is easy to get too many calories by eating or drinking too much sugar or simple carbohydrates. Try to limit sweets, soda, and fruit drinks. They give few nutrients and no fiber.

Choose complex carbohydrates instead. They give you lots of nutrients and fiber without as many calories. They are found in whole grains, vegetables, and dried beans. Even though fruits are a simple carbohydrate food, they are good

for you because they also have lots of fiber and nutrients.

What are common barriers to managing weight?

Many things can get in your way when you try to lose weight. You may not have time to exercise, or you may get sick or injured. Your family and work schedule may keep you away from the gym or a daily walk. When you go out to eat, the portions of food are often huge. And holidays and celebrations are always centered around food.

Diets rarely help. They may help you lose a few pounds quickly. But following a strict diet for a long time is too hard for most people. If you stop dieting and exercising, the weight comes back. You can fall into an unhealthy cycle of losing and gaining weight.

Beware of "fad diets." These are diets that keep you from eating a certain food or food group, such as carbohydrate. Or they are diets that teach you to eat foods in a certain pattern. These are also hard to keep up.

How can you overcome these barriers?

Rather than focusing too much on weight loss, focus on getting healthy. A lifestyle of healthy eating and regular exercise will improve your health and quality of life, no matter what you weigh.

Look for easy ways to fit small, healthy changes into your life. Watch portion sizes, and eat more fruits and vegetables. Walk as much as you can. Three 10-minute walks are as beneficial as one 30-minute walk. These can add up to big improvements in your health.

- **Set goals you can reach.** Set small goals that you can change if you need to. When you reach one goal, set another.
- **Think about your relationship with food.** Do you overeat? If so, what causes you to overeat? Are you bored, stressed, or sad? Do you use food as a reward? Pay attention to your feelings of hunger and fullness. Do not skip meals. Skipping meals may make you so hungry that you overeat during the next meal.
- **Take time to eat healthy food.** Do you rely on fast foods or convenience foods because you do not know how to cook or do not have time? You can find cookbooks at the library or bookstore that can help you make quick and healthy meals. Or use a slow cooker to prepare a meal in the morning that will be ready when you get home at night.
- **Slowly change your eating habits.** Try filling half your plate with vegetables. Fill one-fourth of the plate with lean meat or chicken, and one-fourth with whole grains. Or, set a goal of eating at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day. If you make small, reasonable changes, rather than depriving yourself of everything you love, you will have more success.
- **Keep track of how you eat.** Keep a food diary of everything you eat and drink. Pay attention to serving sizes. Check to see if you are eating a variety of foods. You might find that making a few small changes will help you eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- **Walk as much as you can.** Or find another activity you enjoy. Try to do at least 2½ hours of moderate exercise a week. One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week.

Weight Management: Exercise for Weight Control



When people think of losing weight or staying at the same weight, they most often think "food." They look at changing what they eat. But a big part of managing your weight is exercise.

When you exercise, you burn calories, making it easier to lose or stay the same weight. Exercising also lowers your risk for many diseases, even if you do not lose weight. Being active can protect you from heart disease and may reduce your chance of having high blood pressure, stroke, type 2 diabetes, obesity, anxiety, depression, osteoporosis, low back pain, and some cancers. If you already have one or more of these problems, getting more fit may help you control other health problems and make you feel better.

The right exercise for you

How do you get started? The first thing to do is find an exercise that you like. It makes no sense to start an exercise that your friends do or that is popular if you do not really like it. To find the right exercise for you, answer these questions:

- Do you prefer being active by yourself or with others?
- Do you enjoy being outdoors when possible, or would you rather be indoors?
- Do you prefer activities that involve some contact or no contact? Contact activities include soccer and basketball. Noncontact activities include walking, aerobics, and cycling.
- Do you prefer to compete with others or with yourself? Or would you prefer not to compete at all?
- Do you feel better in the morning, midday, or evening? Which part of the day will work best for fitting in physical activity?
- How much money do you want to spend on your activity? Think about gear, fees, and other costs.
- Are you willing to take classes or get instruction to learn a new activity?
- Have you talked to your doctor about becoming more active? You may have a health problem that limits what you can do. Your doctor may also suggest activities based on your weight.

Once you have picked an activity, make it part of your life. You can do this by scheduling it on your calendar, much as you would any other important appointment. Make it a priority, and do not let it slide for other activities. Let your friends know when you are doing it, so that they will not ask you to do things at this time. They may even want to join you!

If you have picked an activity like walking, jogging, or cycling, you can make it part of a daily routine. For example, you could walk or bike to work, or drive partway and walk the rest of the way. You could make your lunch hour your exercise time.

What's stopping you?

Even when you know why exercise is important, you may not do it. For a few days or a week, write down why you do not exercise. Then write down how you can overcome this problem. Here are some common reasons and what you can do to change things. Add more as you need to.

- "I have no time." "I am too busy."

You may feel overwhelmed or fear change. Look at other people who are active and are about as busy as you. Talk with them about how they fit in exercise. Think of ways to manage your time better. Try shorter periods of activity spread throughout the day, such as three 10-minute walks.

- "I will look silly." "I am too old." "I am out of shape."

You may fear that you'll look bad or won't know what to do. Take a class with others that look or feel like you do. Avoid places that make you feel embarrassed. Walk, or try an exercise DVD at home. Ask for help from a personal trainer or a friend.

- "I'll have a heart attack." "My knees are bad."

Many people have a fear of injury. See your doctor for a checkup and ask about what you can do safely. Read or talk with others about preventing injuries.

- "What if someone is better than me?" "What if I cannot do it?"

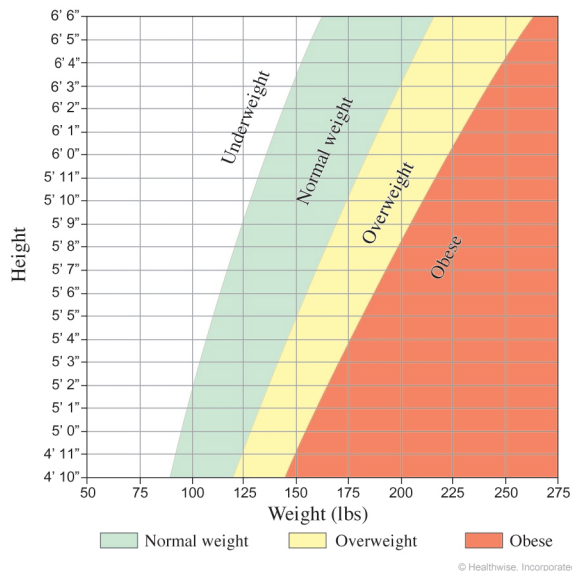
To overcome a fear of failure, set specific goals. If your goal is to become more active than you now are, it will be hard to fail. If your goal is to look like the people in health club ads, then you may not act because this goal is not realistic.

Staying focused

Even if you have made exercise part of your routine, there will be days that you do not feel like it. Try to stay focused and motivated. What motivates you is up to you—everyone responds to something different. Here are a few things you can try to keep your interest up.

- Set weekly or monthly goals you can reach. For example, plan to walk briskly at lunch a few days a week for a certain amount of time. Avoid setting goals that compare you to someone else.
- Keep a record of what you do. Circle the days on a calendar when you exercise. Or use a notebook to write down all the things you do to be active.
- When you reach your first goal, reward yourself with a movie or some gear for your activity. Do not use food as a reward.
- Change your activity. If you find more than one thing you like doing, do them all! For example, on some days, take a walk. On others, ride a bike or take the dog for a hike. An activity like washing the car, housework, or gardening can count as exercise if you do it at a moderate pace.
- If it helps you, find an exercise partner. A buddy can keep you going just by expecting you to show up. He or she can also watch your progress, discuss your schedule with you, or relax with you after a workout. Pick someone who is at about the same level of fitness as you.
- Don't focus on weight. Being active is good for you no matter what you weigh. Check your progress by how you feel, how much energy you have, and how your clothes fit.

Weight Management: BMI



Your body mass index (BMI) can help you see if your weight is raising your risk for health problems. It uses a formula to compare how much you weigh with your height.

To calculate exact BMI, take your weight and height and put them into this equation: $BMI = (\text{pounds} \times 703) \div (\text{inches squared})$.

You can also use the chart above to find your height and weight and find your BMI.

For adults older than 20 years:

- A BMI below 18.5 (shown in white) is considered underweight.
- A BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 (green) is considered a normal weight.
- A BMI of 25 to 29.9 (yellow) is considered overweight.
- A BMI of 30 and above (red) is considered obese.

What else affects your risk for health problems?

In general, the higher your BMI number, the greater your risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, arthritis, some cancers, diabetes, and other health problems. You also may be at greater risk for more problems if:

- You have extra weight around your waist. You are more likely to have health problems if:
 - You are a man and your waist is more than 40 inches around.
 - You are a woman and your waist is more than 35 inches around.
 - You already have health problems such as high blood pressure or diabetes.
 - You have close relatives with a history of these or other health problems.
- You may also be at higher risk for health problems if:
- You are not very active.
 - You eat an unhealthy diet.
 - You drink alcohol or use tobacco products.

What are limitations of BMI?

BMI is a good way for most people to tell if they are at risk for health problems because of their weight. But this method is not perfect.

For most people, a high BMI is a sign of too much body fat. BMI does not work as well for people who are very muscular or those who have little muscle. Muscle weighs more than fat. Because of this:

- A muscular person may have a high BMI but still have a healthy level of body fat.
- A frail, older, or inactive person may have a low BMI but still have too much body fat.

Also, weight is only one measure of your health:

- If you are at a normal weight according to your BMI but do not exercise or eat nutritious foods, you may not be as healthy as you could be.
- If you are a little overweight according to your BMI, you may still be healthy if you eat right and exercise regularly.

BMI is just one way to tell if you are at a normal weight. Another way to find out if you are at a healthy weight is to measure the size of your waist, or your waist circumference. To do this, place a tape measure around your body at the top of your hipbone. This is usually at the level of your belly button.

You have a higher risk for health problems if you are:

- A man with a waist larger than 40 inches.
- A woman with a waist larger than 35 inches.

What should you do if you have a high BMI?

If your BMI is 25 or above, ask your doctor to check your waist circumference and see if you are at risk for disease based on your weight.

Your doctor can help you plan steps to stay healthy or improve your health. You may need to make lifestyle changes such as changing your diet and getting regular exercise.

If you are Asian, your health may be at risk with an even lower BMI.

Where can you find out more?

**National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
Obesity Education Initiative** (301) 592-8573

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/oei

Weight-Control Information Network

1-877-946-4627 toll-free

www.win.niddk.nih.gov