

Weight loss - a healthy approach

To maintain a stable weight, your energy intake needs to equal the energy you use. If you use more energy than you consume, you will lose weight. On the other hand, if you eat more than you use, you will gain weight. The sensible answer to losing excess body fat is to make small healthy changes to your eating and exercise habits. These changes should be things that you can maintain as part of your lifestyle – that way you will lose weight and keep it off.

Don't skip meals

Skipping meals is not recommended. In fact, if you skip meals, you may find you eat more when you do eat and this may lead to a larger stomach capacity. Studies show that stomach capacity can increase if large individual meals are eaten. This can then increase the amount of food you need at each meal before you feel 'full'. This is not a reason to starve yourself if you're trying to lose weight.

'Yoyo' diets will slow your metabolism

Many people who need to lose weight try crash dieting, which is a short-term solution that will increase your body fat levels in the long term. Continual cycles of dieting, weight loss and weight gain are called 'yoyo' dieting. Yoyo dieting does not help you to maintain a healthy body weight. Your body responds to these periods of semi-starvation by lowering its metabolic rate. When you lose weight, you lose fat **and** muscle. Muscle burns calories but fat doesn't. So, when you then stop dieting and eat normally again, your body will burn even fewer calories than before because the relative amount of muscle in your body has decreased and your metabolic rate is slower. This kind of eating pattern can also affect your general health – just one cycle of weight loss and weight gain can contribute to an increased risk of coronary heart disease, regardless of body fat levels. That's why it's important to maintain the weight loss.

Think about when and why you overeat

Some of the factors that can lead to weight gain include:

- Night eating
- Social eating
- Habitual eating
- Eating food while drinking alcohol.

If you can avoid eating at these times, and keep to regular meals and snacks, it will help you to lose weight. You could also try to eat less food at each meal and increase the number of high fibre, high carbohydrate, low saturated fat meals and snacks throughout the day.

You should try to find healthy ways to cope with stress or emotional upsets.

A healthier approach to food

You can lose body fat by making a few easy changes to your eating habits. It will help you lose body fat if you:

- Avoid yoyo diets.
- Eat a wide variety of food from all food groups. Check that you eat from the following food groups every day – bread and cereals, vegetables, fruit, milk and dairy, and meat, fish or legumes.
- Have six small, frequent meals and snacks rather than three large meals a day.
- Reduce your intake of foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt. Make soft drinks, lollies and snack foods an occasional 'extra'. Most adults should eat no more than one or two 'treats' a day. If you are overweight or inactive, you may need to limit treats to less than one a day.
- Try to balance an 'extra' food with extra exercise. The more energy you burn, the more treats you can afford to have. Remember, you should only add extra foods **after** you have covered your nutrient needs with choices from the healthier food groups.

- Cut down on saturated dietary fats and alcohol.
- Try to eat more fresh foods and less processed foods.
- Avoid using food for comfort, such as when you are upset, angry or stressed. Explore other healthy ways to cope with these feelings.
- Try to stop eating once you've had enough. If you continue to eat, particularly foods high in saturated fat, the extra kilojoules will be stored as fat.

The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating includes information about how much and what types of food you need to eat to maintain a healthy weight.

Exercise is important to weight loss

Exercise prevents muscle loss. So it is important to exercise when you are losing weight. Exercise will protect your muscles and keep your metabolic rate ticking over at a healthy level. The number of people who are overweight and obese is increasing every year. This is because we have become more sedentary (inactive). For most of us, physical activity is no longer a natural part of our lifestyle so it must be structured into our daily schedule.

Get moving – it will give you energy

Some people feel too busy or too tired to exercise regularly, but exercise will actually increase your energy levels and help you to feel less tired. Exercise does not have to be overly strenuous to do any good. Even moderate amounts of physical activity can speed up the metabolic rate and aid weight loss. The amount of energy you 'burn up' depends on your age, your gender and your activity level. Young people burn more energy than older people. Men burn more energy than women. More physically active people burn more energy than your average couch potato!

A healthier approach to exercise

The best approach to increasing the level of physical activity in your life is to take it slowly. You can increase your activity levels by simply increasing movement throughout the day. The human body is designed for movement and any physical activity brings benefits. Moderate intensity exercise – walking, gardening, cycling, even mowing the lawn – has been shown to help reduce body fat.

Other suggestions for a more active lifestyle include:

- Play a sport that you enjoy.
- Walk instead of taking the car on short trips.
- Get off the train, bus or tram one stop early and walk the rest of the way.
- Play more outdoor games with your children.
- Walk the dog.
- Take stairs instead of lifts.
- Choose exercise activities that you think are fun, rather than those you think are 'good' for you.

Type of help available

If you have been a chronic crash dieter for a number of years, you might need professional help to reintroduce you to a healthy way of eating. If you are overweight, over 40 years of age or haven't exercised regularly for a long time, check with your doctor before you start any exercise campaign. For inspiration on healthier cooking, have a look at the recipes section of the Better Health Channel.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating www.health.gov.au
- Accredited practising dietitian (APD) www.daa.asn.au
- Recipes on the Better Health Channel.

Things to remember

- Yoyo dieting makes you gain more weight in the long run because it lowers your metabolism.
- Obesity rates are on the rise because the Australian lifestyle is becoming increasingly sedentary.
- Any type of regular physical activity, no matter how moderate, can help you to lose body fat.

Want to know more?

For references, related links and support group information, go to More information.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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