



Healthy weight



When it comes to nutrition, it's easy to spend a lot of time worrying about what to eat. But how much you eat puts an even greater stamp on your long-term health than picking the right kind of fats or choosing exactly the right mix of vitamins.

How much you weigh (in relation to your height), your waist size, and how much weight you've gained since your mid-20s strongly influence your chances of dying early, having or dying from, a heart attack, stroke, or other type of cardiovascular disease, developing diabetes,

developing cancer of the colon, kidney, breast, or endometrium, having arthritis, developing gallstones, being infertile, developing asthma as an adult, snoring or suffering from sleep apnea, or developing cataracts.

Despite the substantial impact of weight on individual health, and the soaring rates of obesity relatively few people see excess weight as a problem. Most people rank obesity low on the list of serious health problems. Equally alarming, only a slight percent say their weight is a problem. That's a shocking finding, given that excess weight leads to a great number of deaths per year. Obesity now accounts for more deaths and chronic disorders, and poorer health-related quality of life, than either smoking or problem drinking.

If your weight is in the healthy range and isn't more than 10 pounds over what you weighed when you turned 21, great. Keeping it there - and keeping it steady - by watching what you eat and exercising will limit your risk of developing one or more of these chronic conditions noted above. If you are overweight, doing whatever you can to prevent gaining more weight is a critical first step. Then, when you're ready, shedding some pounds and keeping them off will be important steps to better health.

What's a Healthy Weight?

Although nutrition experts still debate the precise limits of what constitutes a healthy weight, there's a good working definition based on the ratio of weight to height. This ratio, called the body mass index (or BMI), takes into account the fact that taller people have more tissue than shorter people, and so they tend to weigh more ([Let us figure your BMI for free](#)).

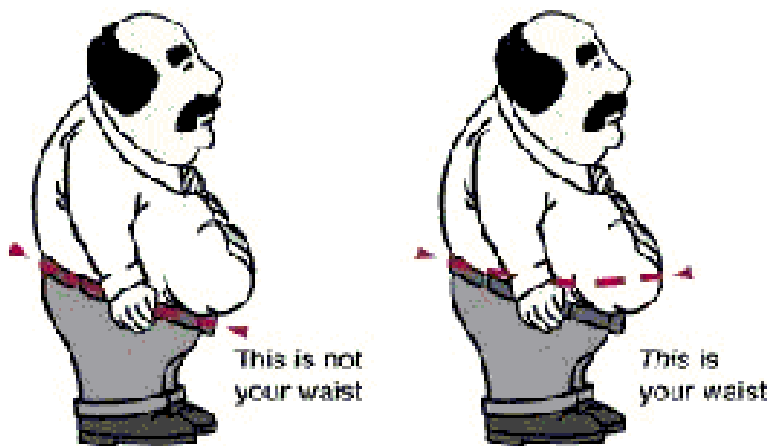
Dozens of studies that have included more than a million adults have shown that a body mass index above 25 increases the chances of dying early, mainly from heart disease or cancer, and that a body mass index above 30 dramatically increases the chances. Based on this consistent body of research, a healthy weight is one that equates with a body mass index less than 25. By convention, overweight is defined as a body mass index of 25 to 29.9, and obesity is defined as a body mass index of 30 or higher.

Nothing magical happens when you cross from 24.9 to 25 or from 29.9 to 30. These are just convenient reference points. Instead, the chances of developing weight-related health problems increases across the range of weights

Muscle and bone are denser than fat, so an athlete or muscular person may have a high body mass index, but not be fat. It's this very thing that makes weight gain during adulthood such an important determinant of weight-related health--few adults add muscle and bone after their early twenties, so nearly all that added weight is fat.

Waist Size Matters, Too

Some research suggests that not all fat is created equal. Fat that accumulates around the waist and chest (what's called abdominal adiposity) may be more dangerous for long-term health than fat that accumulates elsewhere. Some studies suggest that abdominal fat plays a role in the development of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar, and heart disease. It's also possible of course that abdominal fat isn't worse than fat around the hips or thighs, but instead is a signal of overall body-fat accumulation that weight alone just doesn't capture.



Measuring your waist is easy, if you know exactly where your waist really is. Wrap a flexible measuring tape around your midsection where the sides of your waist are the narrowest. This is usually even with your navel. Make sure you keep the tape parallel to the floor. Experts have concluded that a waist larger than 40 inches for men and 35 inches for women increases the chances of developing heart disease, cancer, or other chronic

diseases. Although these are a bit generous they are useful benchmarks.

Waist size is a simple, useful measurement because abdominal muscle can be replaced by fat with age, even though weight may remain the same. So increasing waist size can serve as a warning that you ought to take a look at how much you are eating and exercising.

What Causes Weight Gain

Whether or not your weight changes depends on a simple rule:

$$\text{Weight change} = \text{calories in} - \text{calories out}$$

If you burn as many calories as you take in each day, there's nothing left over for storage in fat cells and weight remains the same. Eat more than you burn, though, and you end up adding fat and pounds. Many things influence what and when you eat and how many calories you burn. These turn what seems to be a straightforward pathway to excess weight into a complex journey that may start very early in life.

- **Genes:** Some people are genetically predisposed to gain weight more easily than others or to store fat around the abdomen and chest. It's also possible that humans have a genetic drive to eat more than they need for the present in order to store energy for future.
- **Diet:** At the risk of stating the obvious, the quantity of food in your diet has a strong impact on weight. The composition of your diet, though, seems to play a little role in weight-a calorie is a calorie, regardless of its source.
- **Physical activity:** The "calories burned", part of the weight-change equation often gets short shrift. The more active you are, the more calories you burn, which means that less energy will be available for storage as fat. Exercising more also reduces the chances of developing heart disease, some types of cancer, and other chronic diseases. In other words, physical activity is a key element of weight control and health.

Low-Fat Weight Loss Strategies Don't Work For Most People

Low-fat diets are routinely promoted as a path to good health. But they haven't fulfilled their promise. One reason is that many people have interpreted the term "low-fat" to mean "it's OK to eat as much low-fat food as you want." For most people, eating less fat has meant eating more carbohydrates. To the body, calories from carbohydrates are just as effective for increasing weight as calories from fat. Thus, each diet designed must be personalized and easy-to-follow.

Low-Carbohydrate, High-Protein Strategies

Another increasingly common approach to weight loss is eating more protein and fewer carbohydrates. One widely publicized high-protein diet entails loading up on meat, cheese, fish, and eggs while dramatically cutting down or even eliminating carbohydrates. This may help you drop some pounds. But the long-term effects of this eating strategy - on weight as well as overall health - aren't yet clear.

Limiting carbohydrates can help avoid sharp spikes in blood sugar and insulin levels, and equally sharp declines in blood sugar. Keeping blood sugar at a relatively steady level may dampen the appetite. However, many high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets are full of saturated and trans fats. These could significantly increase the risk of heart disease regardless of any actual weight loss. A restrictive high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet may also limit the consumption of important vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients found in banned carbohydrates such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Emerging evidence suggests that a more balanced approach that includes protein, carbohydrates, and fats has value as a weight-loss strategy. In a study conducted at Duke University, 51 healthy but overweight or obese volunteers were placed on a diet that included no more than 25 grams of carbohydrate a day, but that put no daily limit on calories. They also received counselling and support on nutrition and exercise. After six months, 41 of the volunteers were still following the program. This is a higher percentage than usually seen with people on low-fat diets. Mean body weight decreased 10.3 percent (or approximately 20 pounds) and the mean percentage of body weight that was fat decreased 3 percent. Cholesterol levels improved across the board, with decreases in LDL and triglycerides and increases in HDL.

In such high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets, the *types* of carbohydrates and fats are of critical importance for long-term health. A high-protein diet that emphasizes monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats while limiting saturated and trans fats will invariably be better than one that includes saturated and trans fats.

Lessons from Achievers

What's the secret for dropping weight and keeping it off?

- **Exercise:** Burning an average of 400 calories per day in physical activity; that's the equivalent of about an hour of brisk walking.
- **Eating fewer calories:** On average, consuming about 1,400 calories a day; of course this doesn't mean that you should aim for 1,400 calories a day, instead what's right for you is based on your weight, height, and activity level.
- **Switching to lower-fat diets, cutting back on sugars and sweets, and eating more fruits and vegetables.**

Keep in mind that these are commonly used strategies, not hard and fast rules. In fact, one of the main take-home messages is that successful weight change is very much a "do-it your way" endeavour. Further to these, people who have been successful in weight change maintenance have reported that they always keep in close contact with the person(s) who has helped them in the first place. Reporting to them once a month has helped them stay focused.

So despite all the pessimistic prognostications about the impossibility of sticking with a weight-change plan, surveys show that it's possible to drop weight and keep it off.

General Strategies for Regaining or Maintaining a Healthy Weight

It's easy to gain weight! How, then, can you drop weight if you need to? Here are some suggestions that work:

- **Set a realistic goal.** Many people pick weight goals they'll have a hard time achieving, like fitting into a size-8 dress or a wedding tuxedo from 20 years ago. A better initial goal is 5-10 percent of your current weight. This may not put you in league with the "beautiful people" profiled in popular magazines, but it can lead to important improvements in weight-related conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes. You don't have to stop there, of course. You can keep aiming for another 5-10 percent until you're happy with your weight. By breaking weight change into more manageable chunks, you'll be more likely to reach your goal.
- **Slow and steady wins the race.** Dieting implies privation and hunger. You don't need either to drop weight if you're willing to take the time to do it right. If you cut out just 100 calories a day, the equivalent of a single can of soda or a bedtime snack, you would weigh 10 pounds (approximately 5 kg) less after a year. If, at the same time, you added a brisk 30-minute walk 5 days a week, you could be at least 20 pounds (approximately 10 kg) lighter.
- **Exercise more.** The amount of energy the body uses to breathe, pump blood, keep muscles ready for action, and other mundane but vital tasks is called resting metabolism. It accounts for two-thirds of your daily energy expenditure. The more you work your muscles--especially with strength training exercises--the more blood sugar they sponge from the blood and the more calories they burn *even when you aren't active*. If you don't exercise, try a walking program. Start out with something simple--get off your bus a stop early and walk the rest of the way to work, park your car at the far end of the company or mall parking lot, or take a brisk walk at lunch or when you come home. Gradually increase the amount of time you walk each day until you do 30 or more minutes a day. A pedometer can help you keep track of your daily activity. These watch-like devices hang from a belt and record how many steps you take. A good goal is 10,000 steps a day. If you already exercise, try to increase its intensity or duration. ([Let us figure out your Daily Calorie Requirements for free](#)).
- **Keep track.** It's easy to eat more than you plan to. A Daily Food Diary (print one) can make you more aware of exactly how much you are eating. Include everything, no matter how small or

insignificant it seems. Small noshes and drinks of juice add up to real calories. And remember if your life is worth living, then it's also worth writing down!!

- **Tame your blood sugar.** Eating foods that make your blood sugar and insulin levels shoot up and then crash may contribute to weight gain. Such foods include white bread, white rice, and other highly processed grain products. As an alternative, choose foods that have a gentler effect on blood sugar. These include whole grains such as wheat berries, steel-cut oats, and whole-grain breads and pasta, as well as beans, nuts, fruits, and vegetables.
- **Don't be afraid of good fats.** Fat in a meal or in snacks such as nuts or corn chips helps you feel full. Good fats such as olive or canola oil can also help improve your cholesterol levels when you eat them in place of saturated or trans fats or highly processed carbohydrates.
- **Bring on the water.** When you are thirsty, reach for water. Drinking juice or sugared soda can give you several hundred calories a day without even realizing it.

REMEMBER: "The longest journey starts with a single step". Most people don't suddenly decide to drop weight and head straight for their goal. It's a trial and error process. The more you learn and the more support you can get, the more likely you'll be to reach your target.

Defensive Eating

In our society, food is everywhere--the mall and gas station, the ballpark and drug store. Super size meals in fast food restaurants are almost too good a bargain to pass up, and servings in all but the most trendy restaurants are often enough to feed two. In the face of such plenty, it's important to learn how to avoid overeating. Here are some strategies that help defend against eating too much:

- **Stop before you are stuffed.** Learn your body's signals and practice stopping before you feel full.
- **Be selective.** It's easy to eat food just because it's put in front of you. Be mindful of what you are eating, and make sure that *you* are choosing what to eat
- **Select small portions.** Portions in most restaurants are over-sized. If you are eating with someone else, try sharing an entrée, or order two appetizers instead of an entrée. If you're eating alone, eat half and take the rest home for another meal.
- **Beware of desserts.** A single slice of The Cheesecake Factory's Original Cheesecake packs almost 800 calories and an incredible 49 grams of fat (28 of them saturated, or 50 percent more than is recommended maximum per day). Either share such a rich dessert several ways or skip it altogether and finish your meal with a piece of fruit or other lower-calorie option.
- **Slow down.** Eating fast short-circuits the signals that your digestive system generates to signal that it's getting full. Slowing down gives your stomach and intestines time to send these messages to your brain.
- **Spoil your appetite.** Having a snack or appetizer before a meal can dull your hunger and help you eat less at the meal.
- **Be aware of why you are eating.** Sometimes we eat when we're bored, anxious, or angry. Try not to soothe your negative feelings with food. Dealing with them in other ways - talking to friends, listening to music, taking a walk, meditating, or even working - can help you relieve stress without gaining weight.

Summary

What's sometimes lost in the dire predictions about overweight and obesity are the enormous benefits of staying lean or working toward a healthier weight. Maintaining a healthy weight throughout life is associated with lower rates of premature death and heart disease, some cancers, and other chronic conditions. What if you're past that point? Dropping 5-10 percent of your weight can substantially improve your immediate health and will decrease your risk of developing such problems. The best

time to start dropping weight is with the first signs that your weight is straying upward. The more overweight you are, the more difficult it can be to drop weight. But as research and successful achievers have proven anyone can change their weight.

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