

Behavioral changes for losing weight

Changing your behaviors or habits related to food and physical activity is important for losing weight. The first step is to understand which habits lead you to overeat or have an inactive lifestyle. The next step is to change these habits.

Below are some simple tips to help you adopt healthier habits.

Change your surroundings. You might be more likely to overeat when watching TV, when treats are available at work, or when you're with a certain friend. You also might find it hard to motivate yourself to be physically active. However, you can change these habits.

- Instead of watching TV, dance to music in your living room or go for a walk.
- Leave the office break room right after you get a cup of coffee.
- Bring a change of clothes to work. Head straight to an exercise class on the way home from work.
- Put a note on your calendar to remind yourself to take a walk or go to your exercise class.

Keep a record. A record of your food intake and the amount of physical activity that you do each day will help inspire you. You also can keep track of your weight. For example, when the record shows that you've been meeting your physical activity goals, you'll want to keep it up. A record also is an easy way to track how you're doing, especially if you're working with a registered dietitian or nutritionist.

Seek support. Ask for help or encouragement from your friends, family, and health care provider. You can get support in person, through e-mail, or by talking on the phone. You also can join a support group.

Reward success. Reward your success for meeting your weight-loss goals or other achievements with something you would like to do, not with food. Choose rewards that you'll enjoy, such as a movie, music CD, an afternoon off from work, a massage, or personal time.

How to treat your weight problem

Successful weight-loss treatments include setting goals and making lifestyle changes, such as eating fewer calories and being physically active. Medication may be an option for some people if lifestyle changes aren't enough.

Set Realistic Goals

Setting realistic weight-loss goals is an important first step to losing weight.

For Adults

- Try to lose 5 to 10 percent of your current weight over 6 months. This will lower your risk for coronary heart disease (CHD) and other conditions.
- The best way to lose weight is slowly. A weight loss of 1 to 2 pounds a week is do-able, safe, and will help you keep off the weight. It also will give you the time to make new, healthy lifestyle changes.
- If you've lost 10 percent of your body weight, have kept it off for 6 months, and are still overweight or obese, you may want to consider further weight loss.

For Children and Teens

- If your child is overweight or at risk for overweight or obesity, the goal is to maintain his or her current weight and to focus on eating healthy and being physically active. This should be part of a family effort to make lifestyle changes.
- If your child is overweight or obese and has a health condition related to overweight or obesity, you may want to seek help for your child for treatment.

Lifestyle changes towards your weight loss goal

Lifestyle changes can help you and your family achieve long-term weight-loss success. Example of lifestyle changes include:

- Focusing on balancing energy IN (calories from food and drinks) with energy OUT (physical activity)
- Following a healthy eating plan
- Learning how to adopt healthy lifestyle habits

Over time, these changes will become part of your everyday life.

Calories

Cutting back on calories (energy IN) will help you lose weight. To lose 1 to 2 pounds a week, adults should cut back their calorie intake by 500 to 1,000 calories a day.

- In general, having 1,000 to 1,200 calories a day will help most women lose weight safely.
- In general, having 1,200 to 1,500 calories a day will help most men lose weight safely. This calorie range also is suitable for women who weigh 165 pounds or more or who exercise routinely.

These calorie levels are a guide and may need to be adjusted. If you eat 1,600 calories a day but don't lose weight, then you may want to cut back to 1,200 calories. If you're hungry on either diet, then you may want to add 100 to 200 calories a day.

Very low-calorie diets with fewer than 800 calories a day shouldn't be used unless your doctor is monitoring you.

For overweight children and teens, it's important to slow the rate of weight gain. However, reduced-calorie diets aren't advised unless you talk with a health care provider.

Healthy Eating Plan

A healthy eating plan gives your body the nutrients it needs every day. It has enough calories for good health, but not so many that you gain weight.

A healthy eating plan is low in saturated fat, *trans* fat, cholesterol, sodium (salt), and added sugar. Following a healthy eating plan will lower your risk for heart disease and other conditions.

Healthy foods include:

- Fat-free and low-fat dairy products, such as low-fat yogurt, cheese, and milk.
- Protein foods, such as lean meat, fish, poultry without skin, beans, and peas.
- Whole-grain foods, such as whole-wheat bread, oatmeal, and brown rice. Other grain foods include pasta, cereal, bagels, bread, tortillas, couscous, and crackers.
- Fruits, which can be fresh, canned, frozen, or dried.
- Vegetables, which can be fresh, canned (without salt), frozen, or dried.

Canola and olive oils, and soft margarines made from these oils, are heart healthy. However, you should use them in small amounts because they're high in calories.

You also can include unsalted nuts, like walnuts and almonds, in your diet as long as you limit the amount you eat (nuts also are high in calories).

Foods to limit. Foods that are high in saturated and *trans* fats and cholesterol raise blood cholesterol levels and also might be high in calories. Fats and cholesterol raise your risk for heart disease, so they should be limited.

Saturated fat is found mainly in:

- Fatty cuts of meat, such as ground beef, sausage, and processed meats (for example, bologna, hot dogs, and deli meats)
- Poultry with the skin
- High-fat dairy products like whole-milk cheeses, whole milk, cream, butter, and ice cream
- Lard, coconut, and palm oils, which are found in many processed foods

Trans fat is found mainly in:

- Foods with partially hydrogenated oils, such as many hard margarines and shortening
- Baked products and snack foods, such as crackers, cookies, doughnuts, and breads
- Foods fried in hydrogenated shortening, such as french fries and chicken

Cholesterol mainly is found in:

- Egg yolks
- Organ meats, such as liver
- Shrimp
- Whole milk or whole-milk products, such as butter, cream, and cheese

Limiting foods and drinks with added sugars, like high-fructose corn syrup, is important. Added sugars will give you extra calories without nutrients like vitamins and minerals. Added sugars are found in many desserts, canned fruit packed in syrup, fruit drinks, and nondiet drinks.

Check the list of ingredients on food packages for added sugars like high-fructose corn syrup. Drinks that contain alcohol also will add calories, so it's a good idea to limit your alcohol intake.

Portion size. A portion is the amount of food that you choose to eat for a meal or snack. It's different from a serving, which is a measured amount of food and is noted on the Nutrition Facts label on food packages.

Anyone who has eaten out lately is likely to notice how big the portions are. In fact, over the past 40 years, portion sizes have grown significantly. These growing portion sizes have changed what we think of as a normal portion.

Cutting back on portion size is a good way to eat fewer calories and balance your energy IN.

Food weight. Studies have shown that we all tend to eat a constant "weight" of food. Ounce for ounce, our food intake is fairly consistent. Knowing this, you can lose weight if you eat foods that are lower in calories and fat for a given amount of food.

For example, replacing a full-fat food product that weighs 2 ounces with a low-fat product that weighs the same helps you cut back on calories. Another helpful practice is to eat foods that contain a lot of water, such as vegetables, fruits, and soups.

Physical Activity

Being physically active and eating fewer calories will help you lose weight and keep weight off over time. Physical activity also will benefit you in other ways. It will:

- Lower your risk for heart disease, heart attack, diabetes, and cancers (such as breast, uterine, and colon cancers)
- Strengthen your heart and help your lungs work better
- Strengthen your muscles and keep your joints in good condition
- Slow bone loss
- Give you more energy
- Help you relax and better cope with stress
- Allow you to fall asleep more quickly and sleep more soundly
- Give you an enjoyable way to share time with friends and family

The four main types of physical activity are aerobic, muscle-strengthening, bone strengthening, and stretching. You can do physical activity with light, moderate, or vigorous intensity. The level of intensity depends on how hard you have to work to do the activity.

People vary in the amount of physical activity they need to control their weight. Many people can maintain their weight by doing 150 to 300 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes to 5 hours) of moderate-intensity activity per week, such as brisk walking.

People who want to lose a large amount of weight (more than 5 percent of their body weight) may need to do more than 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity per week. This also may be true for people who want to keep off weight that they've lost.

You don't have to do the activity all at once. You can break it up into short periods of at least 10 minutes each.

If you have a heart problem or chronic disease, such as heart disease, diabetes, or high blood pressure, talk with your doctor about what types of physical activity are safe for you. You also should talk with your doctor about safe physical activities if you have symptoms such as chest pain or dizziness.

Children should get at least 60 minutes or more of physical activity every day. Most physical activity should be moderate-intensity aerobic activity. Activity should vary and be a good fit for the child's age and physical development.

Many people lead inactive lives and might not be motivated to do more physical activity. When starting a physical activity program, some people may need help and supervision to avoid injury.

If you're obese, or if you haven't been active in the past, start physical activity slowly and build up the intensity a little at a time.

When starting out, one way to be active is to do more everyday activities, such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator and doing household chores and yard work. The next step is to start walking, biking, or swimming at a slow pace, and then build up the amount of time you exercise or the intensity level of the activity.

To lose weight and gain better health, it's important to get moderate-intensity physical activity. Choose activities that you enjoy and that fit into your daily life.

A daily, brisk walk is an easy way to be more active and improve your health. Use a pedometer to count your daily steps and keep track of how much you're walking. Try to increase the number of steps you take each day. Other examples of moderate-intensity physical activity include dancing, gardening, and water aerobics.

For greater health benefits, try to step up your level of activity or the length of time you're active. For example, start walking for 10 to 15 minutes three times a week, and then build up to brisk walking for 60 minutes, 5 days a week.

How Are Overweight and Obesity Diagnosed?

The most common way to find out whether you're overweight or obese is to figure out your body mass index (BMI). BMI is an estimate of body fat, and it's a good gauge of your risk for diseases that occur with more body fat.

BMI is calculated from your height and weight. You can use the chart below to calculate your BMI and interpret it.

Body Mass Index for Adults

First, find your height on the far left column. Next, move across the row to find your weight. Weight is measured with underwear but no shoes.

Once you've found your weight, move to the very top of that column. This number is your BMI.

Height	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
4'10"	100	105	110	115	119	124	129	134	138	143	148
5'0"	107	112	118	123	128	133	138	143	148	153	158
5'1"	111	116	122	127	132	137	143	148	153	158	164
5'3"	118	124	130	135	141	146	152	158	163	169	175

5'5"	126	132	138	144	150	156	162	168	174	180	186
5'7"	134	140	146	153	159	166	172	178	185	191	198
5'9"	142	149	155	162	169	176	182	189	196	203	209
5'11"	150	157	165	172	179	186	193	200	208	215	222
6'1"	159	166	174	182	189	197	204	212	219	227	235
6'3"	168	176	184	192	200	208	216	224	232	240	248

This table offers a sample of BMI measurements. If you don't see your height and/or weight listed on this table, go the NHLBI's complete Body Mass Index Table.

What Does Body Mass Index Mean?

BMI	
18.5-24.9	Normal weight
25.0-29.9	Overweight
30.0-39.9	Obese
40.0 and above	Extreme obesity

Although BMI can be used for most men and women, it does have some limits. It may overestimate body fat in athletes and others who have a muscular build. BMI also may underestimate body fat in older people and others who have lost muscle.

Waist Circumference

Health care professionals also may take your waist measurement. This helps screen for the possible health risks related to overweight and obesity in adults.

If you have abdominal obesity and most of your fat is around your waist rather than at your hips, you're at increased risk for coronary heart disease and type 2 diabetes. The risk goes up with a waist size that's greater than 35 inches for women or greater than 40 inches for men.

You also can measure your waist size. To do so correctly, stand and place a tape measure around your middle, just above your hipbones. Measure your waist just after you breathe out.