

Get help losing

Weight loss programs vary, so find the best match before you sign up

*Story by Lewis Taylor
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It's no secret that cutting calories, eating a balanced diet and being physically active are the safest and most effective steps toward weight loss. But what if you need a little help on that path?

Well, you call the professionals.

That's what Barry Peterson did after having limited success with dieting books and other self-guided weight loss programs. He called one of the many weight loss centers in the area and signed up.

The 43-year-old corporate rental manager for the Pape Group lost seven pounds within the first week. He went on to lose an additional 56 pounds. Today he's cut his body fat from 30 percent to 19 percent. He's exercising regularly, reading nutrition labels carefully and eating smart.

He calls his visit to a weight loss center the best thing he's ever done and recommends it to anyone who's ready, willing and able.

"I needed something that was going to motivate me," Peterson says. "I think a person needs to go into these programs with an open mind and listen to what they say. When they give you a map of what they want you to do, you've got to be ready to do it. You've got to be in the mind-set of this is what you want to do."

As waistlines in the United States continue to expand — the 2003-2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey reported an estimated 66 percent of U.S. adults were either overweight or obese — diet centers such as the one Peterson attended are becoming more popular. Such clinics are cropping up in shopping malls and medical centers and are boosting their membership rolls.

And if, in the past, there was a stigma for men using such centers, it appears to be gone.

Springfield Mayor Sid Leiken sought help losing weight recently, and he took his efforts public. He became a spokesman for LA Weight Loss centers. The individualized program is among the fastest growing weight loss plans in the nation.

"I think that the biggest thing to overcome is just getting started," says Leiken, who has lost more than 25 pounds since he started the program in late September. "I'm hoping that other people will hear our story and that it will help them accomplish their goals."

For both Leiken and Peterson, deciding which weight loss center to go to was easy. Both were referred by friends who had seen success with their respective programs.

In Peterson's case, an acquaintance recommended Medical Weight Loss Centers of Oregon, a physician-guided program that stresses cutting calories and eating small, frequent meals.

Patients are weighed and checked regularly and, in some cases, prescription appetite suppressants are used.

Other diets offer variations on the same theme, urging clients to reduce calories and eat more frequently throughout the day. Although eating more often sounds counterintuitive,

Peterson says, it helps keep his metabolism humming and prevents him from bingeing on the large plates of food he used to eat.

“One of the first things they taught me is that you’ve got to eat breakfast,” Peterson recalls. “You end up skipping breakfast, so your first meal of the day is usually lunch, and you end up eating too much because you’re starving.”

Now, breakfast for Peterson is usually a protein shake, which he follows a couple of hours later with a Zone nutrition bar. Lunch usually involves chicken salad or a light sandwich, followed in the afternoon by another nutrition bar. Dinner is chicken or pork with salad or rice. He eats one last snack two hours later.

Peterson acknowledges that his weight loss program may not be the best fit for everyone.

He was drawn to the fact that it was an individualized program as opposed to a group program. And he likes the fact that the physicians in the program taught him how to read nutrition labels so he could wean himself from the meal replacement products offered by the center.

With so many weight loss programs offering their own meal plans, it is easy to get cynical about the motives of the companies that sell high-priced energy bars and other meal replacements.

But, says Jenny Craig’s Kimberly McKee, the ultimate goal is to help people learn how to choose the right foods themselves, even if it means buying the pre-selected products in the beginning.

“We are a food-based company. We provide all of the food, and we definitely focus on portion control,” McKee says. “But our goal here is to have people eating on their own. The goal is not to keep them on Jenny Craig (food).”

Another variable is whether the program offers group training or individualized training. Weight Watchers, the 40-year-old company that helped pioneer the idea of assisted weight loss, offers regular group meetings that it says can help inspire clients.

“We really believe in the support our clients get from the group meetings,” says Linda King, general manager of Weight Watchers of Southwestern Counties.

Weight Watchers also stresses the fact that it doesn’t sell meal replacement products. The goal, says King, is to teach clients how to shop and cook healthful meals for themselves.

“We do not sell food. That’s one thing that makes us unique,” King says. “Our program is based on healthful foods that you plan and prepare. You eat the food that you love and the foods that you’re used to eating.”

One thing to consider when choosing a weight loss program, experts say, is to look at how a diet center handles the so-called “maintenance” period that comes after the initial weight loss.

Weight Watchers provides a financial incentive by offering free meetings to clients who remain within two pounds of their target weight.

Other programs use high-tech scales that measure body fat and body mass index. Some centers provide extra motivation from counselors.

“The counselors are great,” Leiken says. “When I hadn’t quite hit 20 pounds, they gave me a suggestion. They said go pick up a 20-pound turkey. That’s how much extra weight you’re carrying around.”

All of the attention and instruction provided by weight loss centers doesn’t necessarily come cheap, and health insurance doesn’t cover most programs.

Pricing structures range from weekly to monthly to large upfront flat fees. Some centers even offer financing, often at a high interest rate, and the cost of those meal-replacement products can add up quickly.

The federally sponsored Partnership for Healthy Weight Management suggests asking diet centers upfront for an itemized price list that includes membership fees, fees for weekly visits and costs for diagnostic tests, meal replacement products, dietary supplements and other products.

Motivation is another factor to consider. Along with counseling and peer support, there are other ways to boost morale.

At Oakway Weight Solutions, an individualized dieting program offered out of the Oakway Fitness Center, a life coach provides the motivational component to a program that also stresses diet and exercise.

“Having to make this big change in your life, it could be very stressful,” says Kris Christensen, a general manager at the club. “There’s mood swings, there’s frustration. You might not see what you’re accomplishing. We’re there to help you with that.”

While Oakway’s dieting program stresses exercise, not all diet centers do. Some say that the initial “jump start” period of weight loss has more to do with cutting calories and improving diet than sweating.

They argue that telling people exactly how to exercise can often backfire, and say they would rather see their clients find their own methods of being more active.

Kathleen Hirtz, a general practitioner with a specialty in sports medicine and bariatrics, disagrees with that notion. She heads Prevention Plus, a 12-year-old clinic that offers physician guided weight loss.

“I’m a strong believer that the body was meant to move and by not moving, you suffer consequences, one of which is weight gain,” Hirtz says. “I think there’s a lot of people that don’t like to exercise, and I think (some diet plans) are trying to appeal to those people.”

Exercise isn’t the only component of Hirtz’s plan. Like a lot of weight loss centers, Prevention Plus offers a diet that cuts calories, cuts carbohydrates and boosts protein.

And while Hirtz sees cause for concern with the growing rates of overweight and obese Americans and Oregonians — a 2003 report put the state ahead of all others west of the Rockies in terms of obesity percentages — she says there are reasons to be optimistic.

“I think there’s always going to be a need for (weight loss programs), and I think the problem is escalating,” Hirtz says. “But I think people are starting to think more about their health. ...

“I think people are becoming more aware of how they have to eat and more sophisticated as far as their bodies and what they need to put in them.”

Finding success with weight loss centers

Here are some tips from weight loss center clients and staff on finding success with the right weight loss program.

- **Don’t think of it as a diet:** “They don’t call it a diet, they call it a lifestyle change, and that’s what it really is,” says Springfield Mayor Sid Leiken, an LA Weight Loss client and spokesman. “For my wife and I, it’s been an easy process. You have to change your habits, but we don’t feel like it’s taking away anything.”
- **Comfort is key:** “Weight is a very sensitive subject for people, and they have to be very comfortable with the program they pick,” says Kimberly McKee, center director at Jenny Craig. “Everybody needs to research all of their options first and decide what fits them the best and what works for them. ... We want people to be successful.”

- **Consider your lifestyle:** “Pick a program that fits with your lifestyle and one that (is sustainable),” says Linda King, general manager of Weight Watchers of Southwestern Counties. “We can all do it for one week, but look for something that you can do long term.”
- **Consider your budget and other factors:** “What people need to do is find (a program) that fits their financial situation and is convenient,” says Kathleen Hirtz, head of Prevention Plus physician assisted weight loss center. “They should also like the people that they are dealing with.”
- **Be picky:** “You need to feel comfortable and not intimidated,” says Kris Christensen, general manager at Oakway Weight Solutions. “Instead of walking into the first program you see and (signing up) you need to find out what fits for you.”
- **Don’t cheat:** “If you’re going to cheat, you’re only going to slow yourself down,” says Barry Peterson, a client at Medical Weight Loss Centers of Oregon who lost more than 50 pounds on the physician-guided program.

