

Weight Control: The Power of Healthy Choices

This is a tough question to answer. Even though many people talk about weight, what really matters is how much of your body weight is fat. The body mass index (BMI) is an approximate measure of body fat. It is based on your height and weight. A BMI between 19 and 25 is considered a normal amount of body fat. If someone's BMI is 25 to 29.9, that person is said to be overweight. A person is said to be obese if his or her BMI is 30 or higher. The higher your BMI, the greater your risk for diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, and certain cancers.

How can I lower my BMI?

Some causes that can lead to being overweight:

- Having weight problems in your family.
- Eating when you're lonely, sad, bored or stressed.
- Eating because you feel pressured by friends or family to eat.
- Using food for recreation, or eating just because food is available.
- Taking medicine that makes you feel hungry.
- Having hormone problems that slow your metabolism (how fast your body burns calories).

The best way to lower your BMI is to reduce the total number of calories you take in and to be more physically active. Long-term success is not about finding the "right" diet. It's about identifying your behaviors that have contributed to taking in more calories than your body needs. It is also about making a plan to develop healthier eating and physical activity habits. For example, you may eat when you're under stress rather than when you're hungry. Choosing another activity to do when you feel stressed, such as taking a walk, may help you break the habit of eating at those times.

You're more likely to make changes in your habits if you set a specific goal for yourself. For example, instead of saying, "I'm going to lose 20 pounds," decide that you'll be more active every other day of the week. Be specific about what kind of activity you'll do and which days you'll do it. Your new goal might be: "During my lunch hour on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, I'm going to walk for half an hour in the park." Once your new healthy behavior becomes a habit, you can move on to another goal.

Why is physical activity a big deal?

Physical activity builds muscles, so even if you don't lose pounds, you will look and feel better when you are more active. Being active also reduces your risk of chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes, even if you are overweight.

I'm thinking about becoming more physically active. What's the best kind of activity?

First, ask your family doctor if there is any kind of physical activity that you should not do. Being more physically active doesn't mean you need to have a formal or complicated exercise program. Remember that the best kind of activity is the kind that you'll keep doing. Whatever activity you choose, try to do it for at least 30 minutes per day on most days of the week.

Aerobic exercises, such as swimming, walking or jogging, raise your heart rate and help

burn calories. The longer you exercise, the more fat your body will burn. Walking can be very helpful even if you don't walk fast.

Light weight training also has many health benefits. It helps add muscle mass to your body. Muscle burns calories faster than fat does.

How can I change my eating habits?

Change them one at a time. For example, start by training yourself to eat without doing anything else at the same time. Focus on enjoying the taste and smell of your food by eating more slowly. Don't watch TV, talk on the phone or drive a car while you eat.

Healthy habits:

- Eat breakfast.
- Eat your biggest meal of the day at lunchtime.
- Begin meals with a low-fat salad, soup, broth or a glass of water.
- Eat more vegetables and whole grains at each meal.
- Drink fewer sugar-sweetened beverages (such as regular soda and fruit juice).

If you drink more than one regular soda per day, replace one of them with a diet soda, water or skim milk.

- Limit your alcohol intake.

Know what 1 portion looks like — and stick to it.

- Eat slowly so your body has time to know when you are full.
- Be more active in your daily life.
- Replace some of the sugar in your diet with non-caloric sweeteners
- Get support from family and friends. Support is very important for long-term success in adopting healthy habits.

What's so bad about foods that are high in fat and added sugar?

Foods that are high in fat and added sugar have lots of calories. Fat has almost twice the calories of carbohydrates and protein. Also, compared with calories that come from carbohydrates or proteins, calories that come from fat are more easily used by your body to make body fat.

Foods high in calories from fat and/or added sugar:

- Pastries, doughnuts, cakes, cookies, sweet rolls, pies
- Most crackers and chips
- Cheeses
- Cooking oils, margarine, butter, lard, shortening

Cream, ice cream

- Fried foods, hot dogs and luncheon meats
- Regular soda and fruit-flavored juices

Why is skipping meals not helpful?

Though skipping meals may work for a while, it backfires in the long run. When you skip a meal, you are likely to get too hungry, and then you may eat too much at once.

What can I do when my friends or family members pressure me to eat?

Sometimes a direct explanation and a request for support are enough to get people to understand that you're trying to improve your health habits. If that doesn't work, telling them it's your "doctor's orders" may do the trick. If not, you may have to avoid those people until you feel comfortable enough with your new habits to handle the pressure.

Will diet drugs help me lower my BMI?

Used with a doctor's supervision, certain medicines can help some people lower their BMI. However, they are not the secret to long-term weight loss. Eating a more healthy diet and being more physically active are the way to lose weight and keep it off.

Written by familydoctor.org editorial staff.

Source:

American Academy of Family Physicians' Reviewed/Updated: 12/05; Created: 03/96

Copyright © 1996-2007 American Academy of Family Physicians

This article provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this article applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.