

Weight Management: Healthy Eating



The best way to manage your weight is through healthy eating and being physically active. This means eating plenty of fruits and vegetables and choosing lean meats, nonfat and low-fat dairy products, and whole grains. It also means limiting sweet liquids, such as soda, fruit drinks, and sport drinks. And it means eating less fat, sugar, and highly processed foods.

Try to make fitness a habit. Limiting the time you spend at the computer or watching TV helps you stay active.

You do not have to make big changes at once. Think about some of the things—parties, eating out, temptations—that might get in the way of your success. Then, think about the changes you can make right away.

If you need help managing your weight, ask your doctor about talking to a registered dietitian. He or she can help you change eating habits.

What is a calorie?

The protein, carbohydrates, and fats you get from food give your body energy. This energy keeps your heart beating, your brain active, and

your muscles working. Energy is measured in calories. For example, a food that has 500 calories provides more energy to your body than a food with 200 calories.

Your body needs a certain number of calories each day for you to function and keep doing your daily activities. After your body meets its needs, it stores extra calories as fat. Your weight remains steady when your body takes in the same amount of calories that it burns. To lose weight, you have to use up more calories than you take in.

How do carbohydrates, fat, and fiber affect you?

Fat is a very dense source of energy. It has more than twice the calories per gram than protein or carbohydrate. Cutting back on fat is the best way to reduce the total number of calories in your diet. Animal foods such as meats and dairy products can be a source of hidden fats. Try to choose lean or low-fat versions of these products. Use smaller amounts of fats like butter, margarine, salad dressing, and mayonnaise. These fats can add a lot of calories to your diet.

Fiber helps to keep the digestive tract healthy. It helps to keep blood sugar levels stable and control cholesterol.

You can gain weight without eating fatty foods by eating too much sugar or simple carbohydrates. It is easy to get too many calories from high-sugar foods and beverages. Try to limit soda and fruit drinks. Drink water instead.

Complex carbohydrates found in whole grains, vegetables, and dried beans are good lower-calorie foods. They give you lots of nutrients and fiber. Fruits also have lots of fiber and nutrients, although they also have simple sugars. Simple carbohydrates, such as in sweets

and soda, are high in calories. They give few nutrients and no fiber.

What are common barriers to managing weight?

Many things can get in your way when you try to lose weight. You may not have time to exercise, or you may get sick or injured. Your family and work schedule may keep you away from the gym or a daily walk. When you go out to eat, the portions of food are often huge. And holidays and celebrations are always centered around food.

Diets rarely help. They may help you lose a few pounds quickly. But following a strict diet for a long time is too hard for most people. If you stop dieting and exercising, the weight comes back. You can fall into an unhealthy cycle of losing and gaining weight.

Beware of "fad diets." These are diets that keep you from eating a certain food or food group, such as carbohydrate. Or they are diets that teach you to eat foods in a certain pattern. These are also hard to keep up.

How can you overcome these barriers?

Rather than focusing too much on weight loss, focus on getting healthy. A lifestyle of healthy eating and regular exercise will improve your health and quality of life, no matter what you weigh.

Look for easy ways to fit small, healthy changes into your life. Watch portion sizes, and eat more fruits and vegetables. Walk as much as you can. Three 10-minute walks are as beneficial as one 30-minute walk. These can add up to big improvements in your health.

- **Set goals you can reach.** Set small goals that you can change if you need to. When you reach one goal, set another.
- **Think about your relationship with food.** Do you overeat? If so, what causes you to overeat? Are you bored, stressed, or sad? Do you use food as a reward? Pay attention to your feelings of hunger and fullness. Do not skip meals. Skipping meals may make you so hungry that you overeat during the next meal.
- **Take time to eat healthy food.** Do you rely on fast foods or convenience foods because you do not know how to cook or do not have time? You can find cookbooks at the library or bookstore that can help you make quick and healthy meals. Or use a slow cooker to prepare a meal in the morning that will be ready when you get home at night.
- **Slowly change your eating habits.** Try filling half your plate with vegetables. Fill one-fourth of the plate with lean meat or chicken, and one-fourth with whole grains. Or, set a goal of eating at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day. If you make small, reasonable changes, rather than depriving yourself of everything you love, you will have more success.
- **Keep track of how you eat.** Keep a food diary of everything you eat and drink. Pay attention to serving sizes. Check to see if you are eating a variety of foods. You might find that making a few small changes will help you eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- **Walk as much as you can.** Or find another activity you enjoy. Try to do at least 2½ hours of moderate exercise a week. One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week.