

Disability - managing underweight

Many people in the community have problems with unwanted weight loss. Research suggests that some people with a disability are more likely to be underweight than people in other population groups. There are a number of reasons for this. For example, a person with a physical disability may have decreased muscle mass or may experience difficulty eating and swallowing. There are several ways that a person with a disability can successfully manage their weight to avoid unwanted weight loss. See your doctor or dietitian for expert advice.

Contributing factors

For people with a disability, some of the contributing factors that may lead to unwanted weight loss could include:

- A particular medical condition that affects the body's metabolism
- The person becoming more active
- Reduced muscle mass
- Medications that may decrease appetite
- Difficulty eating and swallowing
- Eating habits that may be affected by depression, anxiety or frustration
- Dependence on family members or carers to provide meals
- Poor knowledge of nutrition and weight management.

Calculating a person's appropriate weight

There are different ways to calculate a person's ideal weight for their height (such as the body mass index, or BMI), but these methods don't always apply to people with a disability. For example, a person with a physical disability may weigh less than is recommended for the general population, but the guidelines do not take into account any reduced muscle mass in their legs or arms.

Always see a doctor or dietitian for help in calculating your ideal weight range and for strategies on achieving a goal weight.

Healthy diet suggestions for those wanting to gain weight

See your dietitian for advice on how many kilojoules you need to consume each day to achieve a slow, healthy weight gain. Suggestions include:

- **Eat more often** – eating six or more small meals and snacks throughout each day may be easier than eating three large meals and can help boost the appetite.
- **Use favourite foods** – foods that arouse little interest are likely to be left on the plate. You are more likely to eat if favourite meals and snacks are provided. Make sure that your diet has a range of healthy foods.
- **Choose full fat foods** – extra kilojoules are needed to achieve weight gain, so choose full fat rather than low or non-fat food products.
- **Add extra kilojoules to meals** – mixing grated cheese, milk powder or poly- or mono-unsaturated margarine or oil into favourite meals adds extra kilojoules without having to eat a large quantity of food.
- **Exercise regularly** – any type of regular physical activity, even gentle stretching, can help stimulate a flagging appetite. Exercise can also help you gain muscle tissue.

Find an eating style that suits you best

Maintaining a healthy weight is only possible in the long term if an 'eating style' is chosen that suits the person. For example, some people prefer eating three main meals each day, while others prefer to eat more regularly and include snacks as well as meals.

Talk to a dietitian about your dietary preferences so they can draw up an eating plan that you will be able to sustain.

Exercise is important

Proper weight management relies on exercise too. People with certain disabilities may have reduced mobility, but it is important to remember that any degree of activity is helpful. For example, a person who uses a wheelchair can still lead a very active life. Exercising in water is often easier for people with certain disabilities, as the buoyancy offers support. Even gentle stretching can prevent muscle contraction and wasting.

An individually planned exercise program is an important weight management strategy, so see a doctor or physiotherapist for further information.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- A support group

Things to remember

- Some people with disabilities are prone to unwanted weight loss.
- Methods of calculating an ideal weight range don't always apply to people with disabilities.
- See a doctor or dietitian for guidance and expert advice.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DHS - Disability Services Division

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