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## Weight loss - a healthy approach

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### Summary

- Yoyo dieting makes you gain more weight in the long run because it lowers your metabolism.
  - The best way to lose weight is slowly, by making achievable changes to your eating and physical activity habits.
  - Managing your weight is a life-long commitment – not just following a diet for a few weeks to drop kilograms.
  - Dieting can be harmful because our body responds to these periods of semi-starvation by lowering its metabolic rate.
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**Being overweight or obese increases our risk of many diseases.** In Australia, around 75 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women are carrying too much body fat and 25 per cent of children are overweight or obese. This means the incidence of obesity-related disorders (such as coronary heart disease and diabetes), is also on the rise.

Losing weight has become a multi-billion-dollar industry. It's hard to go a day without seeing or hearing about "the answer to" or a "miracle" weight-loss solution.

The sensible answer to losing excess body fat is to make small healthy changes to your eating and exercise habits. These changes should be things that you can maintain as part of your lifestyle – that way you will lose weight and keep it off.

### Diets don't work long term

There are lots of **misconceptions about losing weight**. Popular media is full of fad diets and magic weight loss potions endorsed by celebrities and supported by personal success stories. While many of these diets may help you to lose weight while you're following them, as soon as you resume your usual lifestyle, the weight starts to creep back on. That's because losing weight isn't necessarily the problem, it's keeping it off longer term that is difficult.

Managing your weight is a life-long commitment – not just following a diet for a few weeks to drop kilograms.

Remember, if the strategies you're putting into place to lose weight are not strategies that you'll be able to follow for the rest of your life, chances are you'll regain any weight you lose.

### Risks of dieting

Dieting can be harmful because our body responds to these periods of semi-starvation by lowering its metabolic rate.

When you lose weight too quickly, you lose fat and muscle. Muscle burns kilojoules, but fat doesn't. So, when you stop dieting and return to your usual habits, your body will burn even fewer calories than before because the relative amount of muscle in your body has decreased and your metabolic rate is slower.

This kind of eating pattern can also affect our general health – just one cycle of weight loss and weight gain can contribute to an increased **risk of coronary heart disease** (regardless of our body fat levels).

That's why it's more important to be able to maintain weight loss. Weight loss of about ½ to 1kg per week is considered reasonable and more likely to be maintained.

### Make small, achievable changes to your lifestyle

There are many unhealthy misconceptions about weight loss but to reduce your weight, and keep it off, you need to make small, achievable changes to your lifestyle.

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If you are carrying excess weight, changing the way you eat and increasing your physical activity, in a way that you can continue with over the longer term, is the best way to lose and maintain weight loss.

To maintain a stable weight, **your energy (kilojoule) intake needs to equal the energy you use**. If you use more energy than you consume, you will lose weight.

On the other hand, if you eat more than you use, you will gain weight. Small imbalances over long periods of time can cause you to become overweight or obese.

### **How to start losing weight**

It's easy to get overwhelmed by all the information available. If you want to lose weight, a good start would be to base your diet on the **Australian Guide to Healthy Eating**.

If you can avoid unplanned or habitual eating, and keep to regular meals and snacks, this will help you to lose weight.

If you have been on crash diets for several years or finding it difficult, **seek help from a dietitian**. Dietitians can guide you to a healthy way of eating that is based on the latest research and tailored to suit your health and lifestyle.

If you are overweight, over 40 years of age or haven't exercised regularly for a long time, check with your doctor before you start any physical activity.

### **Understand your current eating and exercise habits**

Once you have made the decision to lose weight, it's a good idea to understand your current situation – what are your eating and exercise habits?

A good way to do this is to split them into 'energy in' (diet) and 'energy out' (movement).

#### **What energy (diet) are you taking in?**

Take some time to reflect on your eating patterns. Think about:

- what you eat
- when you eat
- why you eat.

#### **Keep a food diary**

You may find it helpful to keep a food diary for a week to see if you can identify any patterns or themes in your eating habits.

Food diaries are best recorded at the time (rather than at the end of the day) so there's less chance that you'll forget something:

- Write down everything you eat and drink
- How you are feeling
- Your hunger level at the time.

Be as honest as possible. Try not change your habits – tweaking things is the next step.

Your diary might begin to reveal a pattern, such as maybe you choose certain foods or drinks depending on where you are or how you are feeling.

#### **Recognising habits that lead to weight gain**

Some of the food-related habits that can lead to weight gain include:

- Night eating – snacking throughout the evening.
- Social eating – eating when in a group of friends or family.
- Emotional eating – eating in response to your emotions, whether that be boredom, tiredness, anxiety, stress, elation or sadness.

- Distracted eating – eating when doing something else (such as watching TV, working at your desk, or being on social media).

Any themes you identified after completing your food diary can then start to be addressed in a healthier way. Such as –

- Read a book, phone a friend or go for a walk instead of snacking when you are feeling down.
- If you eat in front of the TV or at your desk, sit at a table and focus on the food you're eating – what are the colours, smells, flavours and textures? By eating mindfully – you are more likely to enjoy food and will feel the urge to stop eating when you're full.

### What energy are you burning through movement?

The other side of the energy equation is the kilojoules you burn through movement. Not only does being active burn energy, it also prevents muscle loss, which helps to keep your metabolic rate ticking over at a healthy level.

#### Keep a physical activity diary

Just like keeping a diary of your eating habits, you could also keep a diary for a week to see how much physical activity you're doing. Include instances of physical activity that last 10 minutes or more. Break them into:

- Organised activities – such as walking, running, swimming, playing sport, cycling
- Incidental activities – such as gardening, housework, standing at work or lifting heavy objects.

This will help you to gain an understanding of your current physical activity level and help to find ways to move more.

#### Make a healthy weight loss plan

Once you understand your current habits, the next step is to plan how you will lose weight.

Try to make your goals SMART – be:

- **Specific** – write down exactly what you are trying to achieve. (For example, rather than – I want to do more exercise, make it specific – I will ride my bike to work on Monday and Wednesday.)
- **Measurable** – use numbers or amounts where possible. (For example, I will eat two pieces of fruit, each day.)
- **Achievable** – it is no point writing down a goal that you will never reach. (For example, if you know you are unlikely to stop drinking on weekends, a better goal might be – instead of having a glass of wine each weeknight while watching my favourite tv program, I will drink a glass of water.)
- **Realistic** – your goal needs to be achievable and meaningful to you. (For example, when I feel stressed, instead of snacking, I will stop and ask myself why I feel this way. I will focus on this thought for 10 minutes to establish whether I am hungry before I eat anything.)
- **Time-bound** – set a time frame for your goal to track your progress. (For example, I will walk to work twice a week by the end of May.)

Remember, the best way to lose weight is to do it slowly by making small, achievable changes to your eating and physical activity habits. You may like to set yourself one or two small changes to work on at a time, only adding to these once these have become your new way of life.

Be kind to yourself, if things don't go according to plan, keep trying. You may need to adjust your goals or the time it will take to achieve them.

#### How to stay motivated on your weight loss plan

Once you have a plan in place, be realistic and try to focus on small gains to keep you on track. Some suggestions include:

- Don't rely on the numbers on the scales. Instead, measure your waist circumference – a **healthy waist circumference** is less than 94 cm for men and less than 80 cm for women.
- Notice how your clothes fit – maybe they feel loose, or you now fit into something that was hiding in the back of your wardrobe.
- Become confident in an activity you've been avoiding (such as being able to keep up with the kids without

getting out of breath).

- Maybe you have more energy, things take less effort, or you are sleeping better.

### **How to lose weight the healthy way**

Losing and maintaining weight is a life-long commitment to a healthy lifestyle. Don't change everything at once – a few small tweaks to your diet and movement in the beginning can make a big difference.

#### **Make simple changes to your diet (energy in)**

You can lose body fat by making these few easy **changes to your eating habits**:

- Avoid crash and fad diets to reduce your risk of yo-yo dieting.
- Try to eat a wide variety of foods from all five food groups from the **Australian Guide to Healthy Eating**).
- **Increase your fruit and vegetable intake** – particularly vegetables, most are low in kilojoules and contain fibre, which helps you feel full.
- Be mindful of the portions of foods and drinks you're consuming – the bigger the serve, the more energy it contains.
- Reduce your intake of foods that are high in added fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt.
- Make **soft drinks**, lollies, snack foods and alcoholic drinks an occasional 'extra'.
- Most adults should eat no more than one or two 'treats' a day. If you are overweight or inactive, you may need to limit treats to less than one a day.
- How many standard drinks are you having during the week?
- Try to balance an 'extra' food with extra exercise. The more energy you burn, the more treats you can afford to have. Remember, you should only add extra foods after you have covered your nutrient needs with choices from the healthier food groups.
- Don't eliminate any food group. Instead, choose from a wide range of foods every day and choose 'whole', less-processed foods.
- Have a regular pattern of eating and stick to it.
- Replace sugary drinks with water.
- Avoid using food for comfort, such as when you are upset, angry or stressed. Explore other healthy ways to cope with these feelings, (such as going for a walk, reading a book, having a bath or listening to music).
- Look at the facts – for instance, although it might be easy to eat a family-sized block of chocolate in one sitting, it will take 2.5 hours of jogging (or over 6 hours of walking) to burn off the energy it contains!

#### **Simple ways to be more active (energy out)**

Although we may make excuses such as being too busy or tired, remember, physical activity does not have to be overly strenuous.

Even moderate amounts of physical activity of about 30 minutes a day can speed up our metabolic rate and help us lose weight. We may also find ourselves less tired and have more energy to do the things we enjoy.

**When starting out, take it slowly.** You can increase your activity levels by simply increasing movement throughout the day. The human body is designed for movement and any physical activity brings benefits.

Try these simple suggestions:

- Incorporate moderate intensity activities into your day – (go for a walk, do some gardening or mow the lawn).
- If you drive to work, walk or ride your bike.
- If you need to drive, try to include some movement into your day. Park further away or take public transport.
- While at work, speak to your colleagues in person rather than emailing them.
- If you spend most of the day sitting at work, get a stand-up desk or hold stand up meetings. Go for a walk at lunchtime.
- When shopping, park further away.
- Play a sport or do an activity you enjoy.

- Walk instead of taking the car on short trips.
- Get off the train, bus or tram one stop early and walk the rest of the way.
- Play more outdoor games with your family and friends.
- Walk the dog.
- Take stairs instead of lifts.
- Choose fun activities, rather than those you think are good for you. This gives you a greater chance at sticking with them.
- Be creative – take up an activity you enjoyed as a child.

Keep things simple, you don't have to run a marathon (unless you want to). Look for little ways to be more active so you can start to increase the amount of energy you burn, which will help you lose weight.

### Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Dietitians Association of Australia** Tel. **1800 812 942** or <https://daa.asn.au/find-an-apd/> to find a dietitian near you

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