

A review of weight management research reveals how people lose weight—and keep it off.

Today, two out of three American adults are overweight or obese, and another 5.9% are now considered extremely obese (body mass index ≥ 40) (CDC). Excess weight increases the risk for heart disease, stroke, diabetes, several cancers, gallbladder disease and more. To fight the extra weight, Americans spend billions of dollars a year on diets and products promising weight loss, only to fail along the way.

Approximately one-third of weight lost on a diet is regained in the first year. A thorough review of weight loss studies revealed that while people can lose 5%–10% of their weight in the first few months of a diet, within 4 or 5 years up to two-thirds of people regain even more weight than they lost.

To determine how others are successful, let's turn to the National Weight Control Registry (NWCR) for clues. The NWCR tracks successful weight losers—individuals who have lost at least 30 pounds and kept it off for more than 1 year. The common behaviors these individuals share include monitoring weight and food intake, maintaining a low-calorie and low-fat diet, eating breakfast almost every day, engaging in 1 hour of physical activity daily and limiting television time to 10 hours or fewer per week (NWCR). A review of interventions supports these as beneficial strategies for weight loss and maintenance (Turk et al. 2009).

Following is an exploration of tried-and-true weight management methods.

Self Monitoring: For consistency, choose a day and time to weigh yourself weekly, and tune in to how your clothes fit each day. For people who are just starting out, it's wise to record daily dietary intake in order to learn about eating habits, triggers and where adjustments can be made. As weight is lost and new behaviors become habits, this may not be as necessary. Use a reliable online food record or a simple spiral notebook.

Eating Frequency & Pattern

When and how often one eats may determine weight. Skipping breakfast is associated with a higher body mass index and increased obesity risk. So heed mom's advice about eating breakfast; it will set you up for healthy eating the rest of the day.

Spread calories throughout the day. If you don't eat breakfast, start eating a single item like a carton of low-fat yogurt or a banana within 1 hour of waking and then aim for a daily high-fiber breakfast made up of two to three different food groups.

Portion Control

There is plenty of research showing that the larger the portion served, the more a person will eat. **Weight Control Tip.** Retrain skewed perceptions of what a serving is by measuring food for a few days with help from your hand: 1 cup = size of medium fist; serving of meat = medium-sized palm; cheese serving = two fingers; and a serving of oil = thumb tip. Teach yourself to slow down by choosing one meal a day (or week) that you purposely enjoy slowly, while sitting at a table.

Fill Up on Less

Increasing intake of nutrient-rich foods like fruits and vegetables is a positive strategy for controlling portions. **Weight Control Tip.** Fill up on nutrient-rich, high-fiber foods to satisfy hunger and reduce caloric intake. Adults should aim for 25–35 grams of fiber per day and increase gradually. To control calories, choose fresh, frozen or canned fruits without added sugar over fruit juice and dried fruits.

Source of Calories

Low-fat, high-protein, low-carb? Fad diets promising quick weight loss have confused people about what to eat. **Weight Control Tip.** Quality and quantity matter. Balance blood sugar and insulin levels by eating a combination of macronutrients at meals, focusing on fiber-rich carbohydrates (beans, vegetables, fruits and whole grains), lean protein and healthy fats to keep you full longer.

Low-Calorie Sweeteners

Information suggesting that low-calorie sweeteners increase appetite and cause people to gain weight continues to circulate. Yes, it's calories that count, and incorporating foods and beverages with these sweeteners is one strategy employed by weight maintainers. But do low-calorie sweeteners increase appetite? "According to the American Dietetic Association's position on sweeteners, replacing sugary foods with sugar substitutes can help consumers cut down on calories and control weight," says Jenna A. Bell, PhD, RD, CSSD, co-author of *Energy to Burn* (Wiley 2009) and blogger for ChicagoNow.com/Eatright. "And the ADA agrees with other health

organizations that there is good evidence that sugar substitutes, like aspartame, have no effect on appetite or food intake.” Recent reviews of studies support artificial sweeteners’ role in weight management (Mattes & Popkin 2009; Drewnowski & Bellisle 2007). The debate continues, and more research is needed.

Liquid Calories

Studies maintain that weight loss is positively associated with a reduction in sweetened-beverage consumption (Chen et al. 2009). However, the argument that all liquid calories promote weight gain because they are less satiating than solids, and that our body does not detect and therefore compensate for intake of liquid calories, is inconclusive (Drewnowski & Bellisle 2007). It also goes against clinical evidence, pointing to the effectiveness of meal replacement beverages for weight loss in overweight people who have difficulty self-selecting food choices. Liquid calories can lead to weight loss or weight gain—depending on how they’re used. “I see the issue of liquid calories as being one of volume,” adds Bell. “If you have to hold your to-go cup with two hands, it may have too many calories.”

Weight Control Tip. It’s wise to eat rather than drink the majority of your calories. Stick with water, unsweetened tea or coffee and beverages sweetened with low-calorie sweeteners to control calorie intake.

Small Changes Add Up

Many health experts contend that a “small changes” approach will work for weight loss and weight gain prevention. In a commentary published in the November 2009 issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, researchers describe the “energy gap” as a tool that can be used to address the gradual weight gain that occurs from consuming slightly more energy than is expended each day. The **energy gap** is the degree of change that is needed in the energy balance point in order to reach desired body weight goals (e.g., to prevent weight gain or maintain weight loss). The researchers estimate that an energy gap of about 100 calories per day could theoretically prevent weight gain in most adults. Because energy needs are lower after weight loss, a larger energy gap is needed for maintenance, and this estimate is individualized. The authors provide an example: to maintain weight loss, an energy gap of about 200 calories per day is needed for a 220-pound person losing 10% of body weight. Since many people can lose weight, but very few are successful at maintaining the weight loss, promoting small, sustainable

behavior changes may be one effective approach. Researchers contend that this may be a means to larger dietary and physical activity changes that can result in more significant weight loss (Hill, Peters & Wyatt 2009).

Weight control strategies should focus on reducing energy intake and increasing expenditure. Current physical activity recommendations of 60–90 minutes a day for maintaining weight loss may be difficult for some individuals to achieve or sustain. As clients strive to achieve this goal, applying individualized dietary strategies that work for successful weight losers—two examples are increasing fiber intake and including low-caloric-density foods—is crucial in helping individuals achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Sidebar: What About Weight Loss Drugs?

According to the American Dietetic Association, weight loss medications approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration may be part of a lifestyle-management weight control program. Meridia works on the brain to suppress appetite, whereas Xenical® and Alli® work on the gut to inhibit lipase. “I think of these like reading glasses. They work as long as you take them, but as soon as you stop (take the glasses off) you no longer have the benefit and regain the weight,” explains Carole Conn, PhD, RD, with the Nutrition and Dietetics Program at the University of New Mexico. “Lifestyle choices need to be changed for long-term maintenance, even with the medications. The idea is to phase [them] out as lifestyle control takes over,” adds Conn. She explains that researchers are currently studying combinations of hormones that physiologically suppress appetite, to see if they can be used as a medication to prevent weight gain and promote loss.

Sidebar: Ways To Win At Losing, From Top Athletes

Don't try any fad, crash or omission-style diet. Stick with a balanced approach that includes more unprocessed, high-fiber foods.

Find your motivator (a photo of yourself, tight pants).

Eat smaller, more frequent meals instead of two or three large meals.

Organize your kitchen so that healthy foods are visible.

Diet at night. It's easier to sleep through hunger than to be awake through it.

Keep a food log.

Fuel yourself adequately so you don't have postexercise pig-outs.

Limit liquid calories.

Get on the scale. Better yet, have someone else weigh you weekly.

Source: Modified with permission from Upton, J., & Bell-Wilson, J.

2009. *Energy to Burn: The Ultimate Food and Nutrition Guide to Fuel Your Active Life*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Sidebar: Web Resources

Mayo Clinic readiness for weight loss,

www.mayoclinic.com/health/weight-loss/NU00266

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute,

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose_wt/index.htm

Small Steps Adult and Teen, www.smallstep.gov

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