

Weight Loss Diets

Why do I need to lose weight if I am overweight?

Being overweight increases your risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some forms of cancer. If you are overweight, losing just 5 to 10% of your weight and keeping it off lowers your risk for developing most of these diseases. Your healthcare provider can give you a good sense of whether you have an increased risk of health problems because of your weight.

What can I do to lose weight?

Changes that will help you lose weight include:

- a better understanding of your own health
- healthier eating habits
- a plan for rewards for following your program to lose weight
- more physical activity.

Healthy diets for losing weight involve:

- making smart choices from every food group: fruits, vegetables, grains, milk products, meat, and fats
- finding a balance between how much food you eat and how much exercise you get
- getting the most nutrition out of your calories.

If you are trying to lose weight, this most often means eating fewer calories and avoiding some foods. A weight loss diet needs to give enough nutrition and a good variety of satisfying foods as well as fewer calories.

What works best is a gradual change in your habits of eating and physical activity--a change that you can continue for the rest of your life. The ideal diet is one that helps you lose weight slowly but steadily, so you can keep a healthy weight after you have reached your goal. The best weight loss plan is one that fits your own needs and food preferences. Ask your healthcare provider for a safe, healthy, and effective weight loss program.

What foods should I choose to lose weight?

A healthy eating plan is one that:

- Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and beans.
- Includes fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products.
- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs or egg whites, nuts, seeds, and soy foods.
- Is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

Keep a food diary. As soon as you eat or drink, write it down. It may be helpful to use a small pocket diary. Seeing what you eat and drink will help you learn more about your eating patterns and food habits.

What foods should I limit or avoid?

As much as you can, avoid the following types of food:

- refined carbohydrates (sugar) and foods containing added sugars, such as sucrose, glucose, dextrose, high-fructose corn syrup, corn sweetener, honey, and brown sugar
- refined grain products such as white rice and white flour (Try to substitute whole grains for refined grains whenever you can.).

Also avoid:

- saturated fats such as butter, cream cheese, poultry skin, whole-milk dairy products (including cheese), and fat on meats
- other foods that often contain a lot of fat and trans fats, such as pastries, cakes, cookies, potato chips, and crackers
- fried foods
- packaged meats because they are often high in fat, salt, and preservatives (Look for low-fat, low-salt varieties.).

If you choose to drink alcohol, do so in moderation. Moderate drinking means up to 1 drink a day for women and up to 2 drinks for men. A drink equals 12 ounces of regular beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1 and 1/2 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits. Remember that alcoholic beverages add calories to your diet with very little nutrition.

What are calories?

A calorie is a way to measure the energy value of food. Your body burns calories to use for basic body functions. Proteins, carbohydrates, and fats contain calories and produce energy. To lose weight, reduce the calories in the food you eat (without giving up nutrition). Increase the number of calories you use in physical activity. Your body will burn fat stored in your body to get the energy it needs and you will lose weight.

Eating 500 calories a day less than you need to maintain your present weight can result in losing 1 pound a week. Try to lose 1 to 2 pounds a week. If you lose more than that each week, you begin to lose muscle rather than fat.

Most weight loss diets suggest 1200 to 1500 calories a day for women and 1500 to 1800 calories a day for men. However, calorie needs can vary a lot depending on your activity level and current weight. Ask your healthcare provider or dietitian to help you determine how many calories you need a day.

Don't reduce your calories too much. If you get too few calories a day, your body will shut down its metabolism so that you can survive the lean time. This can happen if you go on a "starvation diet." The body's survival response will then stop you from losing weight.

What are some of the popular diets?

There are many popular diets. Some are considered to be fad diets and unsafe for the long term, and others are healthy and may be right for you. Remember that no one diet works for everyone. Broad categories of popular diets are:

- high-protein diets
- specific food diets
- heart-healthy, balanced nutrition diets
- calorie-conscious commercial programs.
- various other weight loss diets.

High-protein, low-carbohydrate diets result in a quick initial loss of weight. Most of these diets allow unlimited amounts of high-protein foods and limit other food groups. Carbohydrate content varies but usually is very low at first. The amount of fat allowed in the diets varies. Diets that emphasize low amounts of saturated fat and move more quickly to adding other food groups back to the diet are healthier.

- The **Atkins Diet** is a high-protein, high-fat, low-carbohydrate diet. New versions of this diet include the option to substitute healthy fat for saturated fat and eating leaner protein choices, but this option is not emphasized as necessary for success. Avoiding trans fats is strongly encouraged. There are 4 phases to this diet plan. The first includes no more than 20 grams of carbohydrate. As you progress through the 4 phases, more carbs are allowed. When you reach the fourth phase (maintenance phase), 40 to 120 grams of carbohydrate are allowed. In recent studies, dieters following the Atkins plan lost more weight in the first 6 months than dieters on a calorie-controlled, low-fat diet. However, the amount of weight lost in the 2 groups after 1 year was about the same. It is not clear if the Atkins diet is better than a calorie-controlled, low-fat diet for maintaining weight loss.
- The **South Beach Diet** is similar to the Atkins diet for the first 2 weeks except that only very lean proteins and unsaturated fats are allowed. The second phase adds back all food groups gradually but with most starchy carbohydrates eaten less often. This diet is based on the glycemic index and recommends that you completely avoid most refined grains and some fruits and vegetables. Eating foods low in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol continues through the maintenance phase.
- The **Stillman Diet** is a very restrictive high-protein diet that includes almost no carbs, no added fats, and only the leanest proteins. It lacks many nutrients and can be dangerous.

Research has yet to determine the long-term benefits or risks of high-protein, low-carb diets. Recent studies of people following the Atkins Diet showed that they lowered their triglyceride levels (unhealthy blood fat) and increased their HDL (good cholesterol), despite eating a diet rich in saturated fat. A possible risk is that the diet limits foods (whole grains, fruits, and vegetables) that help reduce the risk for cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and other health conditions.

Specific food diets are based on limiting your diet to a few specific foods. They are a type of fad diet. These diets do not count calories, are boring, and depend mostly on will power to follow a diet that is quite lacking in variety. You may develop vitamin and mineral deficiencies after a few days on one of these diets. Examples of these diets are the grapefruit diet and the cabbage diet.

Balanced nutrition diet plans are higher carbohydrate, low saturated fat diets that more closely follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and guidelines recommended by the American Heart Association and Cancer Society.

- The **Dean Ornish** and **Pritikin diet plans** are very high in carbohydrate and extremely low in fat. Although these plans can be healthy, they are hard to stick to for a long time. Both of these diet plans limit total fat intake to 10% of total calories (or, for example, about 20 grams of fat if you are following an 1,800 calorie plan). New national guidelines for a healthy diet call for diets that include 25 to 35% of calories from fat, which means that these diets may be too low in fat.
- The **Mayo Clinic Healthy Weight Pyramid** and the **American Heart diets** are based on high fiber, unrefined carbohydrates, lean protein foods, and recommended levels of healthy fats.
- The **Mediterranean Diet** focuses on plant foods but has very few restrictions. Learning to prepare tasty, small meals is the cornerstone of this plan. This diet includes a lot of fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, bread (often pita bread), and olive oil. Although the focus of this diet is plant based, healthy animal proteins such as fish, lean meats, and dairy are included. The healthy foods and smaller portions result in a gradual weight loss.
- The **Supermarket Diet** begins with a 2-week meal plan that provides grocery lists, recipes, and snacks. It includes details on how to stock your kitchen with healthy foods and ingredients, easy-to-follow meal plans, and lots of nutrition tips. The instructions are easy to follow and can be adjusted for different calorie levels.

Calorie-conscious commercial programs and weight loss clinics offer group support and motivation for the dieter, a wide variety of foods, and meal plans of 500 to 1500 calories a day. These programs are often expensive. Some should not be followed without medical supervision. Some programs, such as Weight Watchers, can provide excellent support for changing bad eating habits and sticking to your weight loss diet.

Other various weight reduction diets: Every day there seems to be a new diet book that claims to hold the secrets of long-term weight control. Here are some of the most popular:

- **Eat Right 4 Your Type** is based on eating a diet that matches your blood type. This diet's recommendations for eliminating certain food groups based on blood type are not supported by any scientific research.
- The **Zone Diet** is a complicated eating plan allowing 40% carbohydrate, 30% protein, and 30% fat. Although this 40/30/30 plan can be healthy and help you lose weight, it requires a lot of counting, calculations, and measuring.
- The **3-Hour Diet** recommends eating within 1 hour after you wake up in the morning and every 3 hours after that until 3 hours before you go to bed. There is some evidence that

eating smaller, more frequent meals can help some people lose weight. The plan is balanced and is fine if you don't mind watching the clock. There is no magic to the 3-hour intervals or proof that keeping your calorie intake constant throughout the day will lead to greater weight loss.

- The **Cheater's Diet** recommends eating a well-balanced, portion-controlled diet during the week, and "cheating" on the weekend. It allows you to eat whatever you want from 9 AM Saturday to 9 PM Sunday to help keep you from feeling deprived. Supporters of the diet claim this boosts your metabolism. There is no scientific evidence showing that eating bigger portions or higher calorie foods over a weekend will improve metabolism. To change habits long term, it is better to include your favorites in small portions on occasion than to binge on the weekend.
- The **Fat Smash Diet** is a 90-day plan with 4 phases consisting of the Detox, Foundation, Construction, and Temple phases. The diet book is easy to read and includes lots of recipes. On the downside, the first 2 phases of this diet eliminate many foods and may be too restrictive for some people. These phases also recommend unlimited fruits, which could cause unwanted increases in blood sugars for diabetics. There are many positive aspects to this plan. It promotes eating more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, fiber, skim dairy, and leaner meats. The diet focuses on portion control, eating small frequent meals, and exercise. It may give some people the necessary jump start they need to start losing weight.

Some diets are very low calorie or total fasting (eating less than 500 calories a day). These diets can be dangerous--even life-threatening--and require supervision by your healthcare provider.

How will physical activity help me lose weight?

In addition to diet, daily walking can help you manage your weight. Start with a comfortable goal: 5, 10, or 15 minutes a day. Walk this amount at least 4 to 7 times a week. Each week add 5 minutes to your time until you have worked up to at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day. Moderate aerobic exercise is generally defined as requiring the energy it takes to walk 2 miles in 30 minutes. Once you have reached the 30-minute goal, you may need to work up to exercising 60 minutes a day to prevent weight gain and 90 minutes a day to lose weight. Invite someone to walk with you--for example, your spouse or a child you've been meaning to spend more time with. Be sure to check with your healthcare provider before starting an exercise program.

As you walk you will burn calories. By exercising regularly you will also increase your metabolic rate. This means you will be burning more calories for several hours after exercise. If you are unable to walk, ask your healthcare provider to recommend another type of exercise.

In addition to helping you lose or maintain your weight, regular physical activity lowers your pulse, blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar. It also increases your energy level and improves your sleep.

What if I can't stop overeating?

If you compulsively overeat, the Overeaters Anonymous organization may help. The program is free. Write or call:

Overeaters Anonymous

Phone: 505-891-2664

Web site: <http://www.aa.org> ▶▶

You can learn more about healthy eating from The Dietary Guidelines for Americans available on the Web sites

- <http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines> ▶▶
- <http://mypyramid.gov> ▶▶.