

Making healthy habits part of your daily life



People with excess weight typically need help in these key lifestyle areas:

- Identifying their triggers to eat
- Modifying their meal plan and eating habits
- Increasing their physical activity
- Managing their stress

Credible behavior modification and lifestyle management programs can address and support all of these critical areas in an integrated approach. Lifestyle management is a highly important component of a weight management plan regardless of other actions. Behavioral interventions that address meal plans, regular exercise, stress management techniques and ways to monitor and manage other risk factors, such as high blood pressure and prediabetes/diabetes, are ideal for people interested in losing weight and keeping it off long-term. Doctors and healthcare providers recommend these types of interventions for their overweight patients before or in conjunction with a more aggressive treatment plan. Evidence shows that weight loss and weight management programs that provide a greater frequency of contacts between the individual and the program are more likely to result in keeping weight off long-term.

Credible lifestyle health coaching programs, in particular, can be an effective tool for weight loss¹, providing personalized guidance and accountability. Board-certified health and wellness coaches are trained to help individuals work on the psychological aspects of weight loss, such as developing a positive mindset and healthy habits. Coaches also assist with habit formation, guiding participants in building sustainable lifestyle changes rather than relying on quick fixes.

Modifying meal plans and eating habits

Rather than focusing on a single nutrient or food, it is best to follow a meal plan that is designed to improve eating habits overall — eating a variety of fruits, vegetables and grain products, especially whole grains; choosing fat-free or low-fat dairy products, legumes, poultry and lean meats; and eating fish, preferably oily fish, at least twice a week.

In general, meal plans should be:

- Low in saturated fat (“unhealthy” fats — namely, saturated fats from fatty meats, butter and hard margarine, whole-fat dairy foods, tropical oils)
- Low in trans fats (“unhealthy” fats — namely, hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated fats in shortening, baked goods, regular peanut butter and fried foods)
- Low in added sugars and refined carbohydrates (“unhealthy” carbs — instant cooked cereals, some ready-to-eat cereals, white rice, white flour and bread, crackers and pasta made from refined flour (even enriched flours and cereals lack fiber)).

However, reducing dietary fats and carbs will not produce significant weight loss unless total calories are also reduced. Eating a variety of foods is key.

Following a “fad” diet or very restrictive diet may help people lose weight quickly, but it’s easy to regain weight as soon as the diet is stopped. Diets that sound too good to be true usually are. Many lack any scientific evidence that they are safe and effective.

While there are numerous different types of “diets,” studies have not found a single best weight loss diet for all people. Instead, the best option is a meal plan that includes a healthy eating pattern and that can be followed over time. Research has shown numerous health benefits, including weight management, with the Mediterranean and DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) meal plans. Both meal plans are flexible and promote unprocessed foods, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats, lean protein and low sodium.

Very-low-energy diets

Very-low-energy diets are commercially prepared formulas of 800 calories (3,344 kilojoules) or fewer per day that replace all usual food and that may result in significant short-term weight loss. Very-low-energy diets are not the same as over-the-counter meal replacers, which are meant as substitutes for one or two meals a day.

A very-low-energy diet may allow a moderately to severely overweight individual to lose about 1.5 to 2.5 kilograms or three to five pounds per week, for an average total weight loss of 20 kilograms or 44 pounds over 12 weeks. Very-low-energy diets may be appropriate for people with BMIs over 30.0 who are highly motivated but have not been successful with a more conservative method. People with BMIs of 27.0 to 30.0 who have medical conditions (such as type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure) that might respond favorably to rapid weight loss may also be candidates for very-low-energy diets. Very-low-energy diets are not recommended for pregnant women or women who are breastfeeding and they are not appropriate for children or adolescents, except in specialized treatment programs.

Many people on very-low-energy diets for four to 16 weeks report side effects including fatigue, constipation, nausea and diarrhea. Dangers of these diets include an increased risk of gout, gallstones and certain cardiac complications. Because of the potential side effects and health risks, people following very-low-energy diets typically should do so only under medical supervision.

Identifying your triggers for eating

Triggers are things in the environment, such as a time, activity, place or person or emotions, such as feeling sad, anxious or bored, that make a person want to eat. Triggers may prompt people to eat even when not hungry or without being aware of what or how much is being consumed.

Increasing physical activity

Generally, healthy adults should perform moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity (such as brisk walking) for a minimum of 150 minutes each week OR vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity (such as jogging) for a minimum of 75 minutes each week OR an equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity. Most adults should also do muscle-strengthening activities that involve all major muscle groups on two or three days each week.

Regular physical activity is an integral part of weight loss and weight management. Exercise alone usually makes a modest impact on the magnitude of weight loss. The greatest weight loss occurs because

**Activity: What are your triggers to eat?**

Learning to be mindful of your triggers can be an important skill for losing weight and keeping it off. Keep a log of everything you eat for a few days. Include both weekdays and weekend days. Review the information to help identify triggers, patterns and trends in your eating.

Date: _____

Food/amount

--

Time

--

Place/activity

--

People

--

Feelings/emotions

--

of the combined effect of eating fewer calories and increasing physical activity. Regular physical activity is absolutely essential for keeping weight off once it is lost. Being physically active has the added benefit of improving fitness and reducing the risk of developing cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer and many other chronic diseases. Studies suggest that strength training can help offset the decline in resting metabolic rate (RMR) that typically occurs with weight loss because it helps preserve muscle.

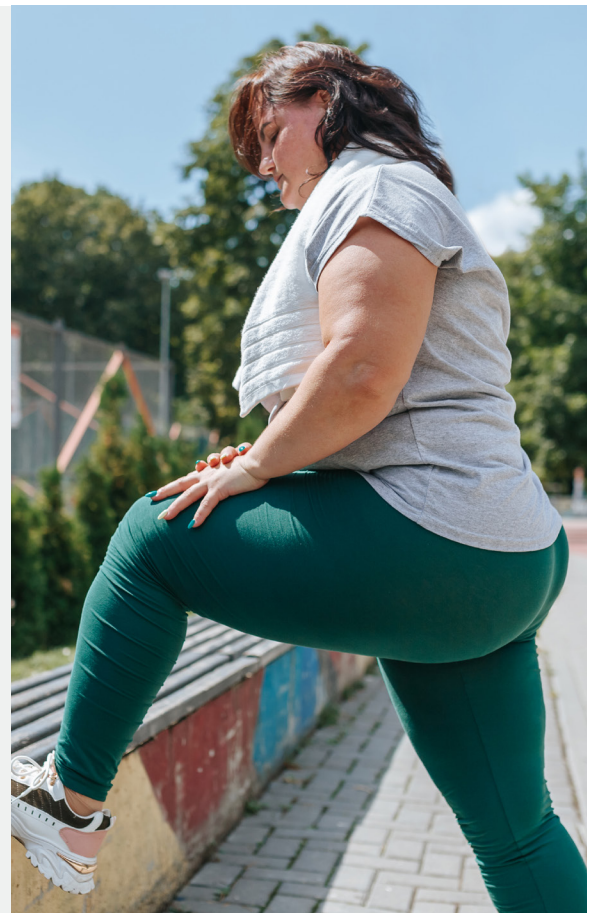


Tips for increasing physical activity

- Initially, sedentary individuals should try to build up gradually to 30 to 45 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity aerobic exercise on at least three to five days per week. Brisk walking is an excellent activity because it is usually safe and convenient to do.
- Over time, physical activity should increase to at least 30 to 60 minutes every day (or nearly every day) of the week. A goal of at least 250 minutes per week of moderate- to vigorous-intensity aerobic exercise is recommended for long-term weight loss maintenance.
- Add two to three days per week of strength training exercises using the body's major muscle groups.
- Exercise does not have to be performed at a high intensity to benefit health. There are major advantages of moderate-intensity exercise versus higher-intensity exercise for weight management.
 - It can be more enjoyable, making people more likely to do it.
 - There is a lower risk of injury.
 - A higher proportion of fat for energy is burned during moderate-intensity exercise.
- Individuals can reduce sedentary time by engaging in frequent, less strenuous activities. There are many opportunities to include lifestyle physical activities, such as taking the stairs or doing household chores, to daily routines.
- Spend less time in sedentary activities (such as watching television, using a computer, sitting in a car or at a desk). Periods of physical inactivity should be broken up by short bouts of standing or physical activity (such as a very short walk around the office or home) whenever possible. Experts recommend breaking up sitting with light physical activity every 30 minutes or so.²

Tips for exercising safely

- Do a warm-up when beginning each exercise session. Likewise, a cool-down period should follow at the end of the exercise session. To warm up and cool down, perform the exercise at a slower pace, for at least five minutes at the beginning and end of each exercise session. Walking is an excellent way to warm up and cool down for any type of exercise.
- Start off slowly and progress gradually. The best way to prevent muscle and other injuries is to not overdo things. Minor muscle soreness is common at first, but goes away as your fitness improves. Individuals should not push themselves so hard that they don't enjoy the exercise or feel tired for a long time after stopping.
- Drink one cup (240 mL) of water every 20 to 30 minutes during exercise, especially if it's hot and humid.
- Stop exercising immediately and call your doctor or healthcare provider if any of these symptoms occur:
 - Pain or discomfort in your chest, abdomen, back, neck, jaw or arms
 - Unusual shortness of breath during exercise
 - Nausea during or after exercise
 - Dizziness or fainting
 - An irregular pulse (if it is usually regular)





Skills to lose weight

- Set behavioral or action goals to make healthy changes in eating habits. The idea is not to reward weight loss, but to reward oneself for replacing unhealthy habits with healthier ones. Don't use food as a reward. Use small rewards, such as a relaxation break, for small changes along the way to your final goal.
- Monitor weight once or twice a week in a consistent manner.
- Plan ahead for meals and snacks. Avoid buying high-calorie/high-fat foods when shopping for food.
- If possible, eat at home as much as possible or prepare food to take with you. Having control over what and how much one eats and how foods are prepared is especially important in the early stages of a weight loss program.
- Make changes in the environment to eat less. Use smaller plates, bowls and glasses to help control how much is eaten. Also, eating slowly and allowing enough time to feel full can be helpful.
- Practice positive thinking, especially about your body image. Some people who lose significant amounts of weight never change their body image to think of themselves as leaner and healthier.



Skills to keep weight off

- Exercise regularly. At least 250 minutes per week of moderate- to vigorous-intensity aerobic exercise are recommended to maintain lost weight or minimize weight regain long-term.
- Monitor weight daily in a consistent manner. If more than two pounds (one kilogram) is gained from one day to the next, take steps immediately to adjust eating and exercise habits to get back to the previous weight.
- Eat foods low in saturated fat, refined carbohydrates, sodium and added sugar. Record foods eaten.
- Be aware of triggers to eat and make adjustments as needed. Learn to break the chain of events that can lead to overeating episodes.
- Use social support to maintain eating and exercise habits. As much as possible, spend time with others who have adopted similar healthy eating and exercising habits.
- Develop effective problem-solving skills.
- View eating and exercise plans as permanent lifestyle habits rather than temporary measures.
- Remain in a behavior modification program for at least one year or longer. The longer people remain in a program, the longer they maintain their weight loss, even for periods up to 10 years or more.

References:

1. Gordon, Neil F., et al. "Clinical Effectiveness of Lifestyle Health Coaching: Case Study of an Evidence-Based Program." *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, vol. 11, 2017, pp. 153-166.
2. American Diabetes Association. "Breaking Sitting Streaks." *Diabetes.org*, <https://diabetes.org/health-wellness/fitness/break-sitting-streak>. Accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

Tables, lists, interactive questions and charts marked with an asterisk (*) and certain other content are used with permission of INTERVENT International, LLC, which owns the copyright to the content.