

How to lose weight safely and effectively

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If you are overweight and want to lose some of the excess pounds, it's important to set yourself a realistic, achievable target. This article explains how you can lose weight safely and effectively.

A good starting point is to have a chat with your GP or a dietitian who can help you put together a healthy eating plan.

Get active and eat less

The best way to lose weight is to increase your activity and eat smaller portions at each meal time. The Department of Health recommends that you get at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise five times a week to stay at a healthy weight. Choose activities that you enjoy and that are easy for you to include in your lifestyle. Below are a few simple suggestions that can help build exercise into your daily life.

- Use stairs instead of taking lifts or escalators.
- Walk or cycle on short journeys - for example do the school run on foot instead of taking the car.
- Take a walk during your lunch break.
- Go for family walks or bike rides at weekends.

To help lose excess weight you must reduce the amount of calories you eat. Changing what you eat in order to lose weight doesn't necessarily mean eating less food, but it does mean choosing different types of food. Your GP or dietitian can help you put together a healthy eating plan. Below are a few ideas to get you started.

- Base your meals on starchy foods like bread, potatoes, rice or pasta.
- Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Use less butter, margarine and vegetable oils.
- Choose low-fat varieties of dairy products, meat, fish and vegetarian alternatives.
- Replace snacks such as chocolate, cakes, biscuits and crisps with healthier alternatives.
- Boil, poach, grill, steam and microwave food instead of frying or roasting.

Improve your eating habits

As well as having a healthy menu it's important to have healthy eating habits. For example snacking in between meals can sabotage efforts to lose weight. Below are a few points to keep your weight-loss plan on track.

- Eat regularly during the day.
- Ensure you have a good breakfast.
- Only eat when you are hungry.
- Eat slowly, chewing every mouthful thoroughly, and only eat until you are comfortably full.
- Don't feel guilty about leaving food on your plate.
- Try not to eat late in the evening - if you feel peckish, choose fruit or a low-fat milky drink.

Set realistic goals

Decide on small, practical changes that you feel comfortable with, and include foods that you enjoy in your eating plan. Aim to lose no more than 0.5 to 1kg (1 to 2lb) in weight every week. Remember, there is no quick-fix answer to long-term weight loss. Weigh yourself once a week and plot a graph so that you can monitor your progress. Try not to focus on how much weight you have lost each week. Instead focus on how you feel and look for positive changes as a result of your new healthy diet, such as feeling more toned or having more energy.

When you first start to restrict your calories, you will lose weight quite rapidly. This will be mostly water and glycogen (a type of energy stored in your liver and muscles) as well as some fat. The rate of your weight loss will then slow down, but the proportion of the weight you lose that is accounted for by fat should increase.

Don't be tempted to crash diet

When you lose weight, you actually lose lean tissue as well as body fat. What is important is the relative proportions of each. The ideal weight loss is 75 percent fat and 25 percent lean body tissue. Broadly speaking, this is what you get with a healthy eating plan that results in slow, gradual weight loss.

Crash diets can harm your health because you lose more lean body tissue and less fat. Your body's response to this is to slow your metabolism down. This is the reason why the weight piles back on quickly once you finish crash dieting.

Seek support

When you are trying to lose weight, it's helpful to get support from family or friends. Arrange activities with your family or friends, such as walking or cycling. Alternatively, join a local slimming group.

Reward yourself

Remember to give yourself a healthy reward when you meet your monthly targets. For example, reward yourself with a beauty treatment or a trip to the cinema.

Further information

Food Standards Agency
020 7404 6504

www.eatwell.gov.uk

Beat (formerly the Eating Disorders Association)
www.b-eat.co.uk

Weightwise
www.bdaweightwise.com