

CHANGING HEALTH BEHAVIOURS: WEIGHT CONTROL

These pages aim to provide some helpful tips on how to prevent weight gain and lose weight by eating healthily rather than focusing on a calorie restricted diet. Their emphasis is that small changes can make big differences and that the healthy way to lose weight is gradually by making permanent changes to your lifestyle. They begin with some general principles on how you might like to start thinking about losing weight. They then summarise the current guidelines for a healthy diet and use these as the basis for some practical tips to help with weight loss.

Talk with your doctor, nurse, or ask to be referred to a dietician, about a comfortable target weight to aim for. Check with your doctor if you have had health problems in the past, if you are under medical supervision, or if you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Make one change at a time

Try making one small change at a time rather than a series of sudden and dramatic changes. The latter are likely to be short-lived and you are likely to go back to your old eating habits very quickly. For example, if your aim is to eat less fat, start with a small step such as using less butter and margarine on bread, toast, etc.

Choose a change that will make a difference

Aim to change the dietary habits which will make a difference. For example, if your aim is to eat less fat, ask yourself which of your dietary habits contribute the most to your fat intake. If you eat chips once a day, changing to boiled potatoes will have more of an impact than choosing not to eat doughnuts if you only eat a doughnut once a fortnight.

Make an easier change first

Try starting with an easier change (the examples to follow may give you an idea which habit to change first, e.g. using less butter/margarine on your toast, in your sandwiches, on your baked potatoes, etc.). If you start by changing a dietary habit which you find relatively easy to do, your success will give you the confidence to continue to make others.

Small changes are worth it

There is a myth that only big changes make an impact and small changes are not worth the effort. This is not true. For example, using a scrape rather than a thick coating of butter on a slice of bread will save at least 50 calories per slice. So if you eat five slices of bread or toast a day, you will save at least 250 calories a day with this one small change.

Assimilate the change into your lifestyle before making the next one

Try waiting until you feel comfortable with your most recent change before you move onto the next one. If you try to make too many changes too quickly, you may feel overwhelmed and disillusioned.

Set realistic goals

Set goals which you are likely to achieve and work gradually towards your aim. For example, if your aim is to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day and you currently eat one, start by increasing your portions to two a day. Also, take into consideration your present circumstances. If you are about to move house, change jobs or go on holiday it might be better to wait until after the event before you begin to change, or make the next change.

Exercise

The combination of a healthy diet and exercise is essential for weight control and weight loss. Choose an exercise you enjoy and one that you can integrate into your lifestyle. If you have been leading a sedentary lifestyle, visit your GP for a check-up first. Start gently and gradually increase the amount you do. Exercise doesn't have to be a strenuous aerobic class; walking is just as beneficial. Little things, like walking up stairs instead of taking lifts are also very worthwhile.

Don't be in a hurry

Losing extra body fat takes time and your aim should be to make and sustain permanent lifestyle changes. The recom-

Ways to eat less fat

Hints

Choose a low or reduced fat spread and use it sparingly, if at all.

Try not to use any spread when it may not be necessary

e.g. in a cream cheese sandwich.

Use semi-skimmed or skimmed milk (both have just as much calcium and protein as whole milk, but much less fat).

Per pint, whole milk has 22 g of fat, semi-skimmed has 9 g and skimmed milk has 0.6 g.

Try low fat yoghurt or low fat fromage frais instead of cream, evaporated milk or condensed milk.

1 oz double cream contains 14 g of fat, 1 oz low fat plain yoghurt or low fat fromage frais contains 0.3 g.

Try half-fat hard cheese or cottage cheese instead of full fat hard cheese. Try curd cheese instead of cream cheese.

2 oz Cheddar cheese contains 20 g of fat, 2 oz low fat Cheddar contains 8 g.

Try making salad dressings with natural yoghurt rather than using mayonnaise or salad cream.

Try grilling rather than frying food (or another method of cooking, e.g. microwaving, baking).

3 oz fried cod in batter contains 9 g fat, 3 oz of poached cod contains 1 g fat.

Beware of meat products like beefburgers and sausages which are very fatty, choose low-fat varieties whenever possible.

Two grilled beefburgers contains 28 g of fat, low fat varieties contain 9 g.

Try to add as little fat as possible when cooking (measure it with tablespoons and gradually reduce the amount).

Remove visible fat from meat; skim off fat from the surface of gravy and casseroles.

3 oz pork chop fried with fat on contains 16 g of fat; grilled with fat removed contains 6 g.

Remove the skin from chicken and other poultry.

3 oz roast chicken with skin on contains 12 g of fat, with skin removed the fat content is 5 g.

Choose tinned fish in brine or tomato sauce

Ways to eat less sugar

Read food labels and beware of all forms of sugar: sucrose, glucose, dextrose, fructose, maltose, honey, syrup, muscovado and concentrated fruit juice.

Try drinking tea and coffee without sugar.

Choose low calorie soft drinks and unsweetened fruit juices.

Buy tinned fruit in natural juice rather than in syrup.

Cut down on the amount of jam, marmalade and honey you use.

Try eating breakfast cereal without sugar, or use less.

Choose wholegrain cereals rather than those coated with sugar or honey.

mendation is to aim to lose half to one kilogram (one to two pounds) a week.

Support

You may find it helpful to join a support group or tell family/friends of your plans so they can offer you support and encouragement.

Enjoy your food

Healthy eating isn't about cutting out the foods you enjoy completely. Healthy eating is about making small changes to the way you eat: eating some foods in smaller quantities or less frequently; choosing different varieties of foods (e.g. wholegrain) or preparing your meals slightly differently (e.g. grilling).

Current guidelines

The current guidelines are based on the following five food groups:

1. Bread, other cereals and potatoes. This group includes breakfast the main part of your diet.
2. Fruit and vegetables. This group includes fresh, frozen and tinned varieties, salad vegetables, beans and lentils, dried fruit and fruit juice. Eat at least five portions a day (fruit juice counts as only one portion however much you drink in a day).
3. Milk and dairy foods. Eat or drink moderate amounts and choose lower fat versions whenever possible.
4. Meat, fish and alternatives. Alternatives include eggs, beans and lentils, nuts and textured vegetable protein. Eat moderate amounts and choose lower fat versions whenever possible. Try to eat at least one portion of oily fish (e.g. sardines or salmon) a week.
5. Foods containing fat and sugar. Eat sparingly, i.e. infrequently and/or in small amounts.

We are recommended to eat a variety of foods from the first four groups every day. We are encouraged to make bread, cereals and potatoes the main part of most of our meals and increase our consumption of fruit and vegetables. Bread, cereals and potatoes are the main sources of starch and fibre in our diets.

It is often thought that these foods are fattening. This is not true: they only become so if either served or cooked with fat. For example, a 6oz / 170g helping of boiled potatoes provides about 120 calories; the same weight of chips provides three times as many calories. Choose high fibre varieties when possible (e.g. brown rice, wholegrain breakfast cereals) as they contain more vitamins and minerals and are more filling.

Foods containing fat and sugar should be used sparingly (e.g. butter, margarine, low fat spreads, cooking oils, mayonnaise and oily salad dressings) or as treats (e.g. biscuits, cakes, puddings, chocolate, sweets, etc.).

Some Practical Tips

Enjoy your food

Try not to make do just because you are hungry. The tendency is not to feel as satisfied if you eat something that you don't particularly enjoy and are likely to want to eat something else very shortly afterwards.

Plan your meal

Plan your meals and snacks, plan your eating times daily in advance and eat regularly

Eating

Eat slowly, you will feel as though you have eaten more. Sit down and think about what you are eating, if you eat on the run and can't remember eating your meal or snack, you are likely to want to eat again. Wait before deciding whether to have some more, you will probably no longer feel hungry once your food has digested. Use smaller plates.

Snacking

If you are hungry between meals, try to snack on low fat, low sugar foods, e.g. fruit, low fat yoghurt or low fat fromage frais (either with or without fruit), fruit tinned in natural juice, plain popcorn, bread sticks, wholegrain crackers, crispbreads, rice-cakes with mashed banana or cottage cheese. Carry healthy snacks around with you.

Shopping

Eat before you go shopping and you will be less tempted to buy unhealthy food. Shop from a list.

Avoiding relapses and collapses

A lapse is a one-off deviation from your new eating behaviour, a relapse is many lapses over a short period of time and a collapse is a complete return to your previous eating habits. Don't worry if you have a lapse. A lapse is a natural and accepted part of change and can be seen as an opportunity for you to learn what triggered you to slip and help you to plan to avoid similar situations. You will be less likely to relapse if you change your eating habits gradually and assimilate them into your lifestyle. If you put yourself on a strict regime which is totally different from your old way of eating, you are more likely to relapse.

There may be regular times or situations when you find it difficult to maintain your new eating habits. Rather than relying on will-power (which can be difficult and stressful) try to identify what triggers you to eat unhealthily so that you can plan a strategy to cope with them. Triggers can be external, e.g. frequently passing a bakery, or internal, e.g. boredom, anxiety, loneliness. External triggers can be avoided for example, by taking a different route home. Internal triggers, urges or cravings can be avoided by planning to do something which is incompatible with eating,

such as exercising, making a telephone call or arranging a meeting at work.

Keeping a diary

It may help to keep a diary of what you eat and drink. A diary can help to identify the changes you can make and will be a record of the changes, and accomplishments, you achieve in the future. Record the approximate serving sizes and what varieties of food you have chosen (e.g. lower fat, lower sugar, higher fibre). A diary may also help you to identify what triggers unhealthy eating so you can plan a diversion to avoid them. Information which you may find helpful to record includes the time and place of eating, what you were doing before you ate, where you were and how you felt.

Going Ahead

Changing eating habits usually means changing long established habits (in relation to shopping and cooking as well as eating). Thinking through your changes beforehand and making a plan can be helpful. A plan can prepare you. Depending on your chosen change you could for example, remove certain foods from your kitchen, shop in advance for appropriate foods or prepare for new cooking methods. It may also draw your attention to difficult situations or times and gives you time to think about ways to cope with these.

My goal is.....	Eat less fat
What change am I going to make?	Use less butter or margerine
How will I make this change?	On toast, jacket potatoes, vegetables
Difficult situations and times...	When serving dinner
Plans for coping with these....	Ask someone else to serve
My reward for being successful will be....	Buying a small non-food luxury, or a special

A final reminder. If there was an easier way, someone would have found it by now. Losing weight is about self-image, but never forget the health benefits that come from reduced chances of heart attack, and stroke, and cancer. Exercise with weight loss improves our chances of a longer, healthier, and probably happier life.

This article was written by Dr Kate Parmenter in 2001 using best information on weight control that could be found at that time.