

Get a Jump-Start on Health



If you tried to define the typical American, you'd have a pretty hard time. We live in one of the most diverse countries in the world. Yet more than 60 percent of the adults in the United States struggle with the same problem: They are overweight or obese. And countless weight loss diets, programs and products haven't put a dent in this statistic.

How do some people lose weight and keep it off? Successful weight loss comes from a combination of a positive attitude and healthy habits. It's the result of a focus on weight management and gradual lifestyle changes, not on quick-fix diets.

What follows are recommendations from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other experts for weight loss that lasts a lifetime.

How to Win at Losing

The biggest challenge when losing weight is keeping it off. The problem often starts with the diet itself. Limited food choices make it hard to stick with a diet. And rapid weight loss almost never stays off.

What can help you take on this challenge? Your attitude can make a big difference. Permanent weight loss requires permanent changes in your lifestyle. Here are three ideas to focus on to prepare mentally for healthy new habits.

- 1. Focus on health, not weight.** Which is more important to you about losing weight? Being able to wear the jeans you wore five years ago? Or having more energy and improving your health? Losing weight for health rather than appearance can make it easier to set reasonable goals. Plus, you're more likely to succeed if you focus on habits rather than on weight. Forming healthy new habits can help you make permanent changes that keep weight off for good.
- 2. Choose the right time.** Begin to make changes in your eating and exercise habits at a time when you are most likely to succeed. Making any change in the way you live takes effort. If you're having major problems, such as with your marriage or finances, you may not have the energy you need to lose weight successfully. Also, be sure you're losing weight because you want to — not because someone else thinks you should. Internal motivation is essential to making changes that stick.

- 3. Set achievable goals.** Trying to make too large a change or too many changes at once can make it hard to succeed. Instead, make lifestyle changes that are small, easy to achieve and specific. Start by choosing one goal you know you can accomplish. For example, take a 15-minute walk at lunch three days a week, have dessert every other day instead of every day, or eat smaller portions of meat. Make one change at a time. When the change becomes second nature, you're ready to set your next goal.

Be flexible, and go easy on yourself. Life is full of curves and bumps. If you don't meet your goal one day, just try again the next. Remember, it takes time to change your lifelong habits. When setting specific weight loss goals, start small. A weight loss of just 10 percent of your body weight can help improve your health. You should lose no more than one to two pounds a week. After six months, focus on maintaining the weight you have lost. Remember, healthy weight loss happens slowly.

Continued on back



Get a Jump-Start on Health *(continued)*

How to Not Diet

If you've ever tried to diet and failed, this won't be news to you: Many diets don't work. What you may not know is that it's not your fault. Many diets set unreasonable weight loss goals and limit your food choices. This sets you up for failure. Your best bet for sensible weight loss is to eat a variety of foods with whole grains, fruits and vegetables. These foods are low in calories and contain fiber, which helps you feel full. Also, research shows that eating several small meals a day, rather than two or three larger meals, may help you lose weight. A sensible diet won't leave you feeling deprived and hungry.

Your doctor can help you develop an eating plan. He or she can also recommend an organization such as Weight Watchers that focuses on developing new habits. A realistic goal for women who want to lose weight is to consume 1,200 to 1,500 calories a day. Men who want to lose weight should consume 1,500 to 1,800 calories a day. Getting fewer calories than this won't give you the nutrients you need. And it can slow down your metabolism so that you burn fewer calories.

Gradually reduce the fat in your diet to no more than 30 percent of calories. This is an effective way to reduce calories and is good for your heart.

While most of your diet should consist of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, don't deny yourself an occasional high-calorie treat. You are more likely to stick with new eating habits if they include small amounts of your favorite high-calorie foods.

Now you are mentally prepared to make changes, and you've set some reasonable goals for yourself. The following suggestions are the additional ingredients for a healthy new way of eating.

Cooking With a Light Touch

Healthy meals that help you manage your weight don't have to be bland. In fact, the more appetizing your meals are the more inspired you'll be to stick with low-fat foods. These tips can help you create healthy, palate-pleasing dishes.

- **Jazz up your meals with seasonings instead of fat.** Try curry powder, Cajun spice mix and gourmet mustards. Instead of cheese, flavor your omelet or burrito with salsa. Use small amounts of oils such as extra virgin olive oil, roasted sesame oil and hot chili oil for extra flavor.

- **Trim the fat.** Use only half the butter, margarine or mayonnaise you usually spread on bread. Cut visible fat from meat and remove the skin from chicken. Choose nonfat or low-fat dairy products and use small amounts of strong cheeses (sharp cheddar, fresh Parmesan), instead of large amounts of mild cheeses. Thicken creamed soups with pureed potatoes, nonfat buttermilk or low-fat milk instead of cream.
- **Try some new kitchen gadgets that can make low-fat cooking a snap.** A nonstick frying pan allows you to saute without adding much oil. A vegetable steamer turns out tender, crisp vegetables that fill you up. A kitchen scale, available in kitchenware stores, helps you control portion sizes. A hot-air popcorn popper pops with no added fat for low-calorie snacking. Use a skimmer to remove fat from gravies, soups and stews.

Motivated to Move

Trying to lose weight using diet alone is like pedaling your bike up a hill without changing gears. You will reach the top, but it's a harder and less efficient way to get there. To keep weight off permanently, you have to be physically active.

By definition, a healthy lifestyle includes exercise. Exercise burns calories and builds muscle. It's also good for your heart and lungs and can help improve your mood.

Both aerobic exercises (brisk walking, jogging, cycling) and strengthening exercises (calisthenics, weight training) are important for weight management. You will burn more fat if you exercise at a lower intensity for a longer period of time. Try to build up to at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise five or more days a week. Brisk walking is the perfect exercise for losing weight. To build muscle, include two or three strength-building sessions a week. Building muscle can speed up your metabolism. This can help you burn more calories.

Stay motivated by trying new activities, such as dancing, hiking or martial arts. If you don't always have time to exercise, you can still find plenty of opportunities to burn calories: Take the stairs instead of the elevator, walk briskly rather than strolling. Any activity you can add to your day will make a difference. These suggestions can help you focus on changing your life, not just your weight.

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