



Patient Information

Shedding Pounds Safely

Over the decades, portions at American eateries have increased steadily in size. Muffins, once around 2 oz each, now tip the scales at up to 8 oz. Fast food chains herald their “super-sized value meals.” Many restaurants have even switched from 10-in to 12-in plates to hold larger servings.

To make matters worse, the average American spends over four hours per day watching TV. For many, this combination of too many calories and too little physical activity results in gradual weight gain. In fact, nearly one third of Americans today are obese and an additional one third are overweight—worrying statistics, considering the serious risks that accompany excess body weight.

Overcoming bad habits (and possibly genetics) can make losing unwanted weight a challenge, but the health rewards are well worth the fight.

How do I know if I’m overweight?

A reliable, scientific tool for determining whether you’re overweight is the body mass index, or BMI, a calculation that considers both your weight and your height. The internet offers many BMI calculators, including one by the National Institutes of Health (nhlbisupport.com/bmi/bmicalc.htm). To work it out on your own, multiply your weight in pounds by 704.5 and multiply your height in inches by itself (square it). Then, divide the first result by the second.

A BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 is considered healthy; between 25 and 29.9, overweight; and 30 or more, obese.

BMI alone may not give you the whole picture, though. Research has shown that excess abdominal weight is riskier than excess weight carried mostly on the hips and thighs. That’s why many experts advise taking a waist measurement in addition to calculating your BMI. Generally, a waist measurement of over 40 in for men and over 35 in for women indicates too much abdominal fat.

What are the associated health risks?

People who are overweight are more likely to develop high blood pressure or high cholesterol, which can raise the risk of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and some types of cancer. Additional health problems related to excess weight include frequent heartburn, arthritis, gallstones, asthma or troubled breathing, and snoring or other sleep disorders. The good news is that losing just 10% of your body weight can reduce these risks dramatically.

How can I lose weight safely?

The key to weight loss is burning more calories than you take in. Beware of any product that promises weight loss without a healthy diet and exercise plan. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Different people respond better to different weight loss strategies, so talk with



your doctor about which are right for you. A counselor or nutritionist can help you identify and change unhealthy eating patterns.

A good way to keep track of your eating habits is through a “food diary.” Write down everything you eat and drink—no matter how small—for about a week. Record where you ate or drank each item, how long it took, and how you felt. Then review your habits: Do you always have dinner in front of the TV? Do you crave chocolate when upset? Do you feel obligated to clean your plate? Changing some of these unhealthy behaviors may not be easy, but it's an important part of safe weight loss.

Use food labels to choose healthier items, such as fat free frozen yogurt instead of ice cream. Eating less fat and sugar will help you cut calories, while leaving room for such filling, nutrient rich foods as whole grain breads, fruits, and vegetables. Trim fat and remove skin from meat, poultry, and fish. Broil, roast, or steam foods instead of frying. And eat slowly! Your brain needs about 15 minutes to recognize a full stomach.

Exercise is essential for effective, long lasting weight loss. It burns calories while building muscle. And the more muscle mass you have, the more efficiently you'll burn calories. A good goal is 30 minutes of physical activity—such as a brisk walk, a bicycle ride, or even yard work—most days of the week. But if you're not used to exercising, start slow and work gradually toward this goal.

If you're having trouble sticking to a diet or exercise plan by yourself, enlist the help of a friend or check out group weight loss programs. To avoid unhealthy or sham pro-

grams, however, research and discuss the program with your doctor before signing up.

What medical treatments are available?

If your weight is putting you at risk, your doctor may refer you to a clinical weight loss program. Run by licensed health care providers, these programs often provide an individualized diet and exercise plan, along with counseling or behavioral therapy. Some people also may require prescription medications or surgery.

Over-the-counter diet pills can be dangerous, especially if taken with other drugs, so check with your doctor before trying them. Prescription weight loss drugs, such as *orlistat* (**or**-lih-stat) or *sibutramine* (sih-**boo**-tra-meen), work by decreasing appetite, increasing the sensation of being “full,” or reducing the body's ability to absorb fat from foods. These usually are prescribed for people whose weight is a serious health risk—and only for short periods of time—as part of an overall weight loss plan. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about possible unwanted effects and interactions before you start taking these or any other drugs.

Surgery for obesity, sometimes called *bariatric* (bah-ree-**ah**-trick) surgery, either closes off or removes part of the stomach. Since such procedures carry risks and require drastic, lifelong dietary changes, they aren't for everyone. Your doctor can help you decide if surgery is right for you.

Neither medication nor surgery is a “quick fix.” You still must eat healthy, exercise, and have a positive attitude. By combining the best weight loss strategies for you, and sticking to them, you can (and will) shed pounds and be much healthier! ●

