

A Brief Guide to Losing Weight

The most common approach to weight loss has been dieting, a method in which people focus on reducing their caloric intake. Although the basic equation underlying this approach is correct – weight loss results when the calories you use exceed the calories you take in – the weight loss produced by using this approach alone is generally not maintained for long. A more effective strategy for weight loss is a multidimensional approach that can be incorporated into your overall lifestyle and sustained for the rest of your life. The best way to start is to take the time to develop a weight-reduction plan that you will be able to enjoy and sustain for years.

Step 1: Assess your readiness to begin a weight-reduction program.

- What is your motivation for trying to lose weight?
- Are you clear about the health risks of maintaining your current weight and the benefits of losing weight?
- Have you checked with your health care provider in order to set a reasonable goal and to get advice about any specific dietary concerns?
- Have you thought about how to enlist the support of your family and friends?

Step 2: Carefully monitor and record your eating habits.

- What do you eat?
- How much of each food do you eat?
- When do you eat?
- Where do you eat?
- Do you eat more when people are around or when you are by yourself?
- Are your eating habits when dining out different from those at home?
- Which setting is more challenging?

Be as specific as possible. It is also helpful to record any situations or emotions that trigger your desire to eat. For example, do you eat more when you are feeling lonely or anxious? You should plan on continuing to monitor your eating habits as you implement your weight-reduction program. This will enable you to identify new obstacles and then make appropriate adjustments.

Step 3: Develop a plan that addresses the problem areas you have identified. The goal is to come up with practical strategies that will make it easier for you to cut back on the calories you consume. For example:

- If you discovered that you find it hard not to snack when there are cookies or other high-calorie items in your kitchen cabinet, purchase fewer of these high-calorie items and more healthful, low-calorie items. (Helpful hint: Most people find it easier to pass up tasty, high-calorie items if they do their shopping shortly after they have had a satisfying meal. Also, make up your grocery list in advance and stick to it.)
- If you get hungry sometimes while working and the only food available at your worksite are high-calorie snacks, prepare for this by purchasing or preparing some low-calorie snacks to take with you.

- If you find that you tend to snack when you are lonely, substitute an alternative activity – perhaps calling a friend or going for a walk.
- If you find that you tend to overeat when you are dining out, cut back on the frequency of dining out, or opt instead to reduce the amount of food you eat in restaurants. Although leaving food on your plate may run counter to what you learned as a child, it is an important part of losing weight, especially because the portions served by many restaurants are quite large. And there is always the option of asking for a “doggie bag” and saving part of your dinner for another meal.
- Pay more attention to the actual eating process. The goal here is to eat less but enjoy it more. One way to do this is to eat more slowly and focus on savoring each bite or mouthful, enjoying the taste and texture of your food. Record how long it typically takes you to eat your meal and then work on gradually lengthening this period. If you find it difficult to eat more slowly, try putting down your eating utensils after every few mouthfuls. This generally slows eating and reduces the total amount of food consumed.

Step 4: Incorporate physical activity into your weight-reduction plan. This can take many forms – walking, biking, jogging, swimming, aerobic exercise classes, and so on. The best strategy is to choose an activity you enjoy and then add it to your daily routine. Most experts recommend 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity five or more days a week. If you find it hard to carve a 30-minute block out of your schedule, then break it down into shorter blocks of time. Three 10-minute periods devoted to physical activity burn as many calories as one 30-minute period. Another good strategy, and one that yields double benefits, is to go for a walk during a break at work or a time at home when normally you would have a snack.

Step 5: Enlist the assistance of as many friends and family as you can. Explain to family, friends, and coworkers what you are trying to accomplish and why it is important. Give them specific suggestions for how they can help you. For example, ask family members to cooperate with you when planning meals and snacks at home and shopping for groceries. If you find it easier to exercise regularly when you have a partner, ask a friend to join you. When your friends or coworkers are deciding which restaurant to go to, request that they choose one that has options that are on your diet.

Step 6: Set reasonable goals. Remember, the objective is not to have a quick, dramatic loss of weight but to reach a healthy weight you can sustain for the rest of your life. This means that you should aim for modest losses every week or so. Set reasonable goals for implementing the changes in your routine. You do not have to tackle every problem area at once. Pick one aspect of your overall plan (e.g., eating more slowly) and focus on implementing it successfully before moving on to the next one.

Step 7: Establish a system of rewards for achieving your goals. Make a list of several items you would like to purchase for yourself, and link each to one of your goals, or think of events or activities you would enjoy and make your participation in these events and activities contingent on achieving certain goals. You can even use dining at your favorite restaurant as a reward.

Step 8: Prepare for occasional setbacks. Even with the best of intentions and a well-designed weight-reduction program, you may not find it possible to always stick with your plan. When these lapses occur, do not make the mistake of giving up. View lapses as learning experiences, not as failures. Carefully review what happened and think of ways you can handle similar situations should they occur.

