

Introduction to weight loss

Whether you are trying to lose 5 pounds or more than 50, the same simple laws of physics determine whether or not you will lose weight and how fast your weight loss will occur. Remembering these simple guidelines and putting them into practice can lead to weight loss without the aid of any special diet plans, books, or medications.

Our weight is determined by the amount of energy that we take in as food and the amount of energy we expend in the activities of our day. Energy is measured in calories. If your weight remains constant, you are probably taking in the same amount of calories you burn each day. If you're slowly gaining weight over time, it is likely that your caloric intake is greater than the number of calories you burn through your daily activities.

Everyone is in control of the amount of food he or she consumes each day, so our intake of calories is something we can control. To a major degree, we can also control our output of energy, or the number of calories we burn each day. The number of calories we burn each day is dependent upon

- our basal metabolic rate (BMR), the number of calories we burn per hour simply by being alive and maintaining body functions and
- our level of physical activity.

For some people, due to genetic (inherited) factors or other conditions, the resting metabolic rate (BMR) can be slightly higher or lower than average. Our weight also plays a role in determining how many calories we burn at rest -- **more calories are required to maintain your body in its present state, the greater your body weight.** A 100-pound person requires less energy (food) to maintain body weight than a person who weighs 200 pounds.

Lifestyle and work habits partially determine how many calories we need each day. Someone whose job involves heavy physical labor will naturally burn more calories in a day than someone who sits at a desk most of the day (a sedentary job). For people who do not have jobs that require intense physical activity, [exercise](#) or increased physical activity can increase the number of calories burned.

As a rough estimate, an average woman 31-50 years of age who leads a sedentary lifestyle needs about 1,800 calories per day to maintain a normal weight. A man of the same age requires about 2,200 calories. Participating in a moderate level of physical activity (exercising three to five days per week) requires about 200 additional calories per day.

How do you "lose" weight?

The most effective method for weight loss is reducing the number of calories you consume while increasing the number of calories you burn through physical activity. To lose 1 pound, you need an expenditure of approximately 3,500 calories. You can achieve this either by cutting back on your food intake, by increasing physical activity, or ideally, by doing both.

For example, if you consume 500 extra calories per day for one week without changing your activity level, you will gain 1 pound in weight (seven days multiplied by 500 calories equals 3,500 calories, or the number of calories resulting in a 1-pound weight gain). Likewise, if you eat 500 fewer calories each day for a week or burn 500 calories per day through exercise for one week, you will lose 1 pound.

Examples of calorie content of some popular foods and beverages include:

- one slice original-style crust pepperoni pizza - 230 calories
- one glass dry white wine - 160 calories

- one can cola - 150 calories
- one quarter-pound hamburger with cheese - 500 calories
- one jumbo banana nut muffin - 580 calories

Any activities you do throughout the day are added to your BMR (basal metabolic rate) to determine the total number of calories you burn each day. For example, a 170-pound person who spends 45 minutes [walking](#) briskly will burn about 300 calories. The same time spent on housecleaning burns about 200 calories, and mowing the lawn for 45 minutes consumes around 275 calories. For more, please read the [Calories Burned During Fitness Activities](#) article.

How fast should you expect to lose weight?

Most experts agree that **a safe, healthy rate of weight loss is one to 1 ½ pounds per week.**

Modification of eating habits along with regular exercise is the most effective way to lose weight over the long term. It is also the ideal way to ensure that the weight stays off.

Starvation diets may result in rapid weight loss, but this weight loss is almost impossible to maintain for most people. When food intake is severely restricted (below approximately 1,200 calories per day), the body begins to adapt to this state of poor [nutrition](#) by reducing its metabolic rate, potentially making it even more difficult to lose weight. It is also possible to experience hunger pangs, bouts of [hypoglycemia](#), [headaches](#), and mood changes from overly stringent [dieting](#). These symptoms can result in binge eating and weight gain. Since a highly restrictive diet is almost impossible to maintain for a long time, people who attempt to starve themselves thin often start to gain weight again when they stop dieting.

The no-diet approach to weight control

By adopting sensible eating habits and practicing portion control, you can eat nutritious foods so that you take in as many calories as you need to maintain your health and well-being at your ideal weight. Often, weight loss occurs on its own simply when you start making better food choices, such as **avoiding**

- processed foods,
- sugar-laden foods,
- white bread and pasta (substitute whole-grain varieties instead),
- foods with a high percentage of calories from fat, and
- [alcoholic drinks](#).

While nothing is absolutely forbidden, when you do succumb to temptation, keep the portion size small and add a bit more exercise to your daily workout.

By replacing some unwise food choices with healthy ones, you'll be cutting back on calories. If you add some moderate physical activity, you have the perfect weight-loss plan without the need for special or inconvenient (and often expensive) diet plans.

Let's look at an example of a successful no-diet weight loss program:

A 45-year-old woman complains that she has gradually put on 12 pounds over the past year. In the last month, she's faced a stressful work deadline and added another 4 pounds to her

frame.

This individual's goal is to lose the 16 pounds she has gained. Since her weight has been gradually increasing, she knows that she is consuming more calories than she is burning, especially with her sedentary job. She decides that a weight loss of 1 pound per week (equal to a deficit of about 3,500 calories, or cutting 500 calories per day) would be acceptable and would allow her to reach her goal in about four months.

She decides to make some changes that will allow her to cut back an average of 250 calories per day.

- Skipping a large glass of sweetened iced tea will save about 200 calories.
- Substituting mineral water for the cola she regularly drinks during meetings can save another 150 calories.
- Foregoing her morning muffin snack (or eating only half a muffin) can also save 250 calories or more.

To reach her goal of a 500-calorie-per-day savings, she adds some exercise.

- Getting up early for a 20-minute walk before work and adding a 10-minute walk during her lunch break add up to a half hour of walking per day, which can burn about 200 calories.
- On weekends, she plans to walk for 60 minutes one day and spend one hour gardening the next day for even greater calorie burning. If walking for 60 minutes is too much, two 30-minute walks one day would burn the same number of calories.
- Twice per week she plans to stop at the gym on the way home from work, even if only for a half hour of stationary [cycling](#) or [swimming](#) (each burning up to 250 calories).

By making just some of the dietary cutbacks mentioned and starting some moderate exercise, this individual can easily "save" the 3,500 calories per week needed for a 1-pound weight loss, leading to a healthy rate of weight loss without extreme denial or deprivation. Furthermore, her changes in diet and lifestyle are small and gradual, modifications that she can maintain over time.

What about special diet plans (fad diets and popular diets)?

Many people prefer to have a set of rules to follow when dieting. Others may crave the emotional support from attending counseling sessions or meetings. Diet products, books, and services have become a billion-dollar industry, so there are obviously many people looking for help with weight control. Before you jump on the latest diet bandwagon, *remember that organized diet plans and programs can only result in weight loss if you burn more calories than you consume. No dietary supplements, exercise devices, combinations of foods, or specific patterns of eating will change this fact.*

Some examples of popular diet plans include the [Atkins diet](#), [The South Beach Diet](#), [Weight Watchers](#), [Jenny Craig](#), [Body for Life](#), [Dr. Andrew Weil's diet plan](#), and the [Ornish diet](#). All of these diets have their proponents, and all of them have been successful for some people. Because eating habits and preferences vary widely among individuals, before you decide on a diet plan, **ask yourself if the plan sounds realistic to you**. If the plan involves rigorous measuring of portions and calorie counting, are you up to the task? If you're forbidden to eat certain foods, will you develop cravings for them? Do you feel that you will feel comfortable adhering to the diet guidelines? Will the diet's requirements fit easily into your daily schedule? Finally, consider that once you've lost the weight, you may regain the weight if you return to your previous eating habits, so any weight-loss plan should be something you can live with for a long time. For more on comparing diet plans, please read the [Comparing Popular Weight Loss Diets](#) article.

Remember that *the most successful weight loss comes from dietary changes and healthy food choices that will stay with you over time, not from diets that leave you feeling deprived or result in binge-eating episodes*.

Why is weight loss important?

Maintenance of a healthy body weight is important for maintaining both physical and emotional well-being and preventing disease. Excess weight and [obesity](#) have been associated with an increased risk for numerous medical conditions, including

- heart disease,
- [high blood pressure](#),
- [stroke](#),
- [diabetes](#),
- [osteoarthritis](#),
- some types of [cancers](#),
- [sleep apnea](#), and
- elevated blood [cholesterol](#) levels.

It should be noted that reduction in weight for those who are overweight can make a major impact on the conditions listed above. Many overweight people also report improved mood, increased self-esteem and motivation, and feeling healthier in general after they have lost weight.

7 tips for successful weight loss

1. **The desire to lose weight must come from the individual.** If you're truly ambivalent about making changes in your lifestyle or are doing this to please someone else, you're likely to fail. When making changes, decide what's right for your lifestyle. Your best friend's diet and exercise plan may be completely wrong for your habits and interests. The key is to find a system that works for you.
2. **Don't blame yourself if you aren't perfect.** If you once fail at your attempt to curtail your overeating, it doesn't mean you are a failure at weight control and that you should just give up. Accept that you made a poor choice, but don't let that poor choice influence the rest of your plan. The same holds true with exercise. Skipping a few workouts doesn't mean you can't get back on track. Weight control does not involve making perfect choices all the time; rather, it's

about attempting to make good choices more often than poor ones.

3. **Avoid surroundings where you know you're tempted to make poor food choices.** Everyone has a time when we're most likely to overeat, whether it's the morning coffee break or after-work gathering with friends. Try to plan other activities or distractions for those times, or plan in advance how you're going to handle them and stick to it.
4. **Surround yourself with people who support your efforts.** Even our good friends can knowingly or unknowingly sabotage weight-loss attempts. Spend time with those people who will not pressure you to make poor food choices.
5. **Decide on some nonfood rewards for yourself when you reach interim goals.** For examples, at the end of the first week of healthy eating or after the first 5 pounds lost, buy yourself a new CD or book.
6. **Stock your pantry and refrigerator with healthy foods.** Get rid of the high-calorie, low-nutrition snacks like chips and candy. But don't forget to have plenty of healthier options available as well, such as popcorn (hold the butter, try Parmesan cheese sprinkles), low-fat cheese and yogurt, fruit, instant cocoa without added sugar, sugar-free popsicles or puddings, or whatever appeals to you when you're hungry for a snack.
7. **Set small goals and focus on these rather than the "big picture."** Decide where you want to be in a week or in a month, rather than focusing on the total amount of weight you'd like to lose.