

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO HEALTHY WEIGHT LOSS

The basic principle behind weight loss is simple: you want to create a negative energy balance. That means your energy input (the calories you take in) should be less than your energy output (the calories you burn). But figuring out how to make that happen can get pretty confusing.

There are an overwhelming number of diets and exercise fixes out there. Which ones work? Are some weight loss methods unhealthy? To help you sort out fact from fiction, here's a quick guide to healthy weight loss.

WHAT IS A REALISTIC WEIGHT LOSS GOAL?

Many people who are overweight start out with unrealistic weight loss goals, with a "dream" weight that is 30% or more below their current weight.

- A good rule-of-thumb for healthy weight loss is to expect to lose 1 lb/week for females and 2 lbs/week for males. Higher rates of weekly weight loss usually indicate water loss which is regainable.
- In medical terms, successful weight loss is defined as losing 5% of your body weight over 6 months without regaining it. For a 180 lb person, that means losing 9 lbs over 6 months.
 - This type of weight loss has been shown in studies to significantly improve health outcomes, like diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, etc.
- Losing more than 15% of your body weight and maintaining it is an extremely good result, even if you never reach your "dream" weight.

A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT WEIGHT LOSS

- When you lose weight, you are losing mostly fat but also muscle. Typically, 4 pounds of weight loss consists of 3 pounds of fat and 1 pound of muscle.
- Ideally, you want to keep muscle and lose fat. Common sense, right? But here's a key weight loss fact that isn't obvious: Muscle mass increases your non-genetic metabolism (basic metabolic rate or BMR).
 - BMR is the baseline rate at which your body is burning calories as you go about your day. You know how some people seem to be able to eat anything and never gain weight? And others seem to gain weight just by looking at food? Well, that's the genetic BMR that your parents passed down to you, and, unfortunately, it's not something you can change.
 - BUT you do have the ability to improve your non-genetic BMR by increasing your body's muscle mass. Resistance exercise (weight lifting) 2-4 times/week combined with additional calorie and protein intake can increase muscle mass. More muscle helps your body burn extra calories even when you're not thinking about it, like when you're sleeping, sitting in class, standing in line, etc.
- All diets will lead to weight loss, at least in the short run. However, a very low calorie diet will also send your body into starvation mode:
 - When you try to starve away body fat, you also starve away more muscle mass. The result is a higher fat to muscle ratio and a lower BMR.
 - Insufficient protein intake (on top of a very low calorie diet) will lead to an even greater decrease in your BMR.
 - Though you may lose weight initially with a very low calorie diet, the end result is a weaker, flabbier body.

DIET, EXERCISE, OR BOTH?

Not surprisingly, a combination of calorie restriction and consistent exercise leads to the best weight loss results.

- Reducing caloric intake (without exercise) is known to result in weight loss. Two effective strategies include eliminating empty calories from sugar sweetened beverages (SSB) and reducing portion sizes at night.
- Studies show that exercising alone (without a change in diet) results in no weight loss. Some people end up gaining weight because exercise can increase appetite.
- Adding exercise to a healthy diet will increase weight loss by another 20%. The key to maintaining a regular exercise regimen is finding an activity that you enjoy. Exercise at least 5 days a week, and schedule it as early in the day as possible. Plan your weekly exercise sessions ahead of time to promote success.
- Exercise also helps to reduce stress. Less stress means less stress-eating. But less stress also means that your body is producing lower levels of cortisol, which may help with weight loss.

WHAT'S THE BEST DIET?

Unfortunately, this is not a one-size-fits-all answer. All diets are temporary and only work if you stick to them. The best diet is what works for you. The key is choosing a diet that fits your lifestyle and eating patterns. Then focus on making one small change at a time.

Despite the crazy number of diets out there, they all fall into one of two categories:

- **Quantitative diets** limit the number of calories you eat.
 - Examples include Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem.
 - It is best to avoid starvation diets (those that are under 800 calories a day). In addition to losing a higher muscle to fat ratio, starvation diets can have harmful effects on the body.
- **Qualitative diets** limit the types of foods you eat.
 - Examples include LCHF (low carb, high fat), Atkins (very low carb), Ornish (very low fat), and Mediterranean diets.
 - Mediterranean diets are high in monounsaturated fats, fruits, vegetables, and grains. They include moderate amounts of low-fat dairy (mostly cheese) and a relatively low intake of red meat.

Many people will start by choosing a specific diet for weight loss. Let's say you've chosen the Atkins diet or Weight Watchers, and you're doing great. But after a while, you begin to wonder if these diets are realistic in the long run. Who can avoid all carbs all the time or eat Weight Watcher meals for the rest of their lives?

So, how do you maintain that weight loss on your own? By eventually transitioning to a well-balanced diet. Please refer to the nutrition guidelines on the next page and our "What is Healthy Eating?" handout for more information.

Free personalized weight loss counseling is available to VCU students without a referral. Schedule an appointment at Student Health with our Registered Dietitian Nutritionist by calling 804-828-8828, extension 5.

A QUICK GUIDE TO NUTRITION

■ **CARBOHYDRATES** (fruits, vegetables, grains)

- Your body converts most carbohydrates into sugar (glucose), which is the body's predominant fuel source. Glucose that does not get used up by the body will eventually get stored as fat.
- Not all carbs are created equal!
 - 1c of a starchy carb (eg. pasta, rice, corn, peas) contains more than double the calories found in 1c of a non-starch carb (eg. green vegetables).
 - Whole grain carbs contain fewer calories per gram than white flour-based (refined grain) carbs or potatoes because they have fiber.
- That means you can lose weight by decreasing your intake of refined white starches and replacing them with carbs that contain fiber.
 - Choose whole grains, like brown rice, quinoa, whole grain pasta, etc.
 - Replace ½ of the starch in a meal with 1-2c of vegetables.
 - Another easy method is dividing your plate into 3 parts: Instead of having a whole plate of spaghetti, have 1/3 plate of spaghetti (preferably whole grain). Fill another 1/3 with lean protein, and fill the remaining 1/3 with colorful veggies and/or fruits.

■ **PROTEIN** (meats, seafood, nuts, beans, soy products, dairy products)

- Protein is very important for weight loss because it:
 - Decreases appetite (this is because protein is more filling than carbs and will sustain you for longer).
 - Helps keep blood sugar levels stable.
 - Increases muscle mass when combined with resistance training.
- A diet without sufficient protein (eg. incorrect vegetarian diets) can lead to increased appetite and weight gain.
- The recommended daily allowance (RDA) for protein is 2 servings (about the size of the palm of your hand) per day of lean meat and 3 servings per day of low-fat and/or nonfat dairy products.
- Consume protein sources with fiber within 1 hour of rising and every 4 hours to reduce cravings, improve energy, and promote weight loss.
 - Start with a high-protein breakfast, like an egg omelet with veggies or low-fat greek yogurt with fruit.
 - Choose protein that is leaner and healthier. Lean protein is anything with 2 legs or less. Examples include skinless chicken and turkey, eggs (whites), fish, and soy.

■ **FATS**

- Contrary to popular belief, most of our body fat does not come from eating fat. It comes from eating too many calories! When you consume more calories than you need, the extra fuel from carbohydrates, protein, and/or fat that your body doesn't use gets stored as fat.
- Most experts recommend a daily fat intake of no more than 30% of your total calories. That means 60 grams of fat per day for a 2000 calorie diet (which is typical for a college student).
- Most of your fat intake should come from healthy plant fats (ie, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats). These are found in vegetable oils, nuts, seeds, fish, avocados, etc. Although the Mediterranean diet is one of the highest fat diets (40% of daily calories), it is one of the healthiest diets due to higher plant fat intake.
- Avoid or limit unhealthy fats:
 - Saturated fats are mainly found in animal products, such as cheese, butter, and red meat. They are also found in coconut and palm oils, which are used widely in commercial food preparation.

- Trans fats are solid at room temperature. They are found in processed foods made with "partially hydrogenated" oils. Major sources include fast foods and commercially baked goods/snacks.

■ **SALT (SODIUM)**

- Limit your salt intake to no more than 2300mg daily (1 tsp of salt contains 2400mg of sodium).
- The culprit in a high-salt diet is the salt that's already IN the food (not the salt you add to food)! Most of the salt in our diet comes from:
 - Processed foods such as frozen meals, canned foods, pickled foods, lunch meats, cheese, breads, cereals, sauces/dressings, snack foods, and soda (including diet soda).
 - Food from restaurants.
- Check nutrition labels. High salt foods contain 20% or more of the Daily Value for sodium.
- Reduce restaurant meals. If you do eat out, aim for 3 favorite spots a week or less. Choose restaurants with healthier options by reviewing the nutrition information ahead of time.

■ **BEVERAGES**

- Avoid liquid calories because they are less satisfying than solid foods. On average, you will end up consuming 20% more if you eat the same food as a liquid (instead of as a solid).
 - Everyone knows to avoid sodas. But fruit juice is better, right? Wrong. 1c of fruit juice contains 30gm of sugar, which is the same amount found in 1c of Coke.
 - Sports drinks and "vitamin" waters may sound like healthy alternatives to juice and soda. But in reality, they are loaded with extra calories that you don't need.
- So what should you drink? Water, water, water! If you don't like the taste of plain water, jazz it up with a wedge of lime/lemon, mint, or cucumber slices.
- Don't confuse dehydration with hunger, so always drink (water) first and eat second! You'll feel fuller and eat less.

EXERCISE SECRETS

- Both aerobic exercise and resistance training are important. However, resistance training is much more effective when it comes to weight loss:
 - 30 minutes of cardio 5 days/week (think Prius) burns the same number of calories as 10 minutes of resistance training 2 days/week (think Hummer).
 - Your body will also burn more calories for 18-24 hours after a strength workout (higher and longer than after an aerobic workout).
- Start with 10 minutes of resistance training twice a week (and add in heart-healthy aerobic exercise as often as you can):
 - Do 10 exercises for 1 minute each (5 upper body and 5 lower body).
 - Work large muscle groups first, then smaller muscle groups. Lower body exercises like squats and lunges use larger muscles, which is more effective for weight loss.
 - Ask Student Health for home exercise handouts or check out the weight machines (and personal trainers) at the VCU gyms.
- Increasing daily non-exercise activity also has more impact on weight loss than doing 30 minutes of aerobic exercise a day. Walking more is a simple way to increase lower body resistance training and burn more calories (you burn 150 calories per hour just by walking across campus). So skip the car ride (and save gas money & the environment), park further away, take the stairs, etc.