

# How to have a healthy weight

The UK population is getting fatter. Levels of obesity have tripled since 1980. Over half of women, and around two-thirds of men are now either overweight or obese.

The main explanation for this is a change in our diet and lifestyles. High calorie food is cheap, well advertised and constantly available. Meanwhile, heavy work in industry and agriculture has mostly been replaced by sedentary activities in service industries. Increased use of cars, computers and labour-saving devices have also cut the amount of physical activity in the daily routine.

### The risks of being overweight

Being overweight increases the risk of health problems including heart attack and stroke, diabetes, bowel cancer and high blood pressure. Excess weight also makes arthritis more likely and can make breathing and sleeping difficult.

### Causes of obesity

A calorie is a unit of energy. We take in calories when we eat and drink and burn them up in daily activity. When the amount of calories taken in from food and drink equals the amount burnt off through physical activity, body weight remains roughly stable. The cause of obesity is consistently eating more calories than are burnt off.

Obesity does run in families and the tendency to put on weight is greater in some people than in others eating a similar diet. However, it is likely that family eating and activity habits are a more important cause of obesity.

### Guidelines for a healthy weight

The most common benchmark of healthy weight for adults is based on height and weight, and is called body mass index (BMI). BMI acts as a good indicator of the total amount of body fat and a reliable predictor of the likelihood of disease associated with being too heavy (or too light).

To work out your BMI, divide your weight in kilograms by your height in metres and then divide the figure you get by your height again.

### Understanding your BMI

**Underweight - BMI less than 18.5**

Some people in the underweight category (BMI under 18.5) are naturally lean and healthy. But being underweight can also be bad for your health. If you are in the underweight category and have been restricting your diet, you should aim to gain weight and get back into the normal weight range for your height. If you are finding it difficult to put on weight, or you lose a lot of weight rapidly, you should see your doctor.

**Healthy weight - BMI 18.5-25**

If you are in the normal category (BMI 18.5-25) for your weight and height, you should aim to maintain your weight through a combination of healthy diet and physical activity. Don't be tempted to try to get into the underweight category.

**Overweight BMI - 25.0-30**

If you are in the overweight (BMI 25-30) category you should concentrate on not gaining any more weight. Try to cut down on sugary and fatty foods and on the amount you eat to get back into the normal weight range for your height. Increasing your levels of physical activity will help.

**Obese - BMI 30.0 - 40**

If your body mass index is obese (BMI 30-40) or morbidly obese (BMI over 40) then your risk of health problems is high. It is important that you try to lose some weight and should consider asking for help from your doctor.

### Limitations of BMI

BMI doesn't apply to everybody. If you have a lot of muscle, you may have a BMI over 25 but very little body fat. Similarly, if you have very little muscle, you may still have too much body fat, even though you are in the correct weight range for your height.

If you suspect this is true for you, then looking at your body shape and body composition can be useful.

## Body shape

Where the fat is stored on the body relates to the risk to health. Carrying fat around the middle of the body, giving the body an apple shape, is a greater risk to your health than carrying it around the bottom and thighs, which gives a pear shape.

Measuring your waist gives a rough guide to whether you need to lose some weight. The at-risk waist measurement is 102 cm (40 inches) for men and 88cm (35 inches) for women. If you are under 150 cm (4'11 ft) tall, a smaller measurement will apply.

## Body composition

Measuring how much of your body weight is made up of fat can be a useful way of monitoring your weight. Our Q-active instructors can measure your body composition using an electronic monitor, which passes a painless electric current through the body.

## How to be a healthy weight

In order to lose weight, you need to burn more calories through physical activity than you take in from food and drink. This means tipping the "energy balance" by eating fewer calories, burning more of them off or, preferably, a combination of both of these.

If you have a lot of weight to lose, it is better to set a realistic medium-term goal, rather than aiming to lose 50 kg. Doctors often suggest a 10 percent weight loss to begin with, achieved over about six months. You should do this by tipping the energy balance. Then, once you've managed this, look again at setting a new goal. At this level, you may already have reduced many of the risks to your health and your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol is likely to be lower. You may feel and look better too.

## Choosing a diet

Some diet programs and adverts promise a "quick fix" of rapid weight loss. These are often unscientific, and may be harmful. The challenge is not just getting to, but maintaining a healthy weight in the long term. Avoid crash diets and fad diets and if you want to follow an organised diet program, look for one that:

- only promotes weight loss of 0.5 -1 kg (1-2lbs) a week - any more than this and you'll be losing water and muscle, not fat
- encourages you to follow the guidelines for healthy eating - a balanced, varied diet that incorporates all major food groups
- is realistic and flexible enough so that you can stick to it - no extreme hunger and no blanket bans on certain foods
- encourages your everyday life to be more physically active
- helps you to learn new lifestyle habits and ways of thinking about food, so you can maintain your target weight once you have reached it.

## Making your own changes

You can also lose weight by making your own adjustments to your daily diet and exercise patterns. The best way for most people to lose weight is to combine more physical activity with a diet that is lower in calories. In general you should aim to reduce the "energy balance" by 500-1000 calories per day.

## Tips for controlling calories

- Keep a food diary for a week, writing down everything that you eat and drink. People who are overweight often don't realise how much they are eating.
- Use your food diary to find ways of cutting down calories. For instance, you could cut 500 calories per day (which = 1lb fat a week) by changing the balance of foods on your plate, e.g. less cheese and more salad with your dinner. Or you could cut out a regular snack food and replace it with a piece of fruit.
- Don't forget that drinks count towards your daily calorie intake. Alcohol is high in calories - three pints of beer could add up to 600 calories. Sugary drinks should also be limited. A can of cola contains 135 calories, but apart from the energy it has virtually no nutritional value.
- Aim to do 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the week. Moderate activity is where you feel slightly warm and out of breath - brisk walking is ideal. Try to make this part of your daily routine. For example, take the stairs at work instead of the lift, and walk to the shops instead of taking the car. A longer session of lower-intensity activity is also good for burning fat. Could you walk at least part of the way to work everyday?