



Obesity and Body Weight: Factors You Can Change



When it comes to your weight, there are some factors you can control.

How much and what you eat and drink

Consuming more calories than you burn is the cause of overweight and obesity. In fact, you can't gain weight without consuming more calories than you burn. That's true regardless of your genetics, heredity, and metabolism. Even small numbers of extra calories consumed each day will increase your weight over the long run.

- For example, a person who takes in 2,500 calories per day on average ends up consuming a total of 912,500 calories over the course of a year.
- Increasing caloric intake by just 1% would be total an extra 9,125 calories.
- That could turn into an extra 2.5 pounds. A pound of body fat equals 3,500 calories.
- Applying this theory, a person who starts this pattern weighing 125 pounds at age 20 would weigh 200 pounds by age 50.

Not all calories are equal. Foods that are heavily processed and high in added sugar are metabolized differently in the body from whole foods such as fruits and vegetables. The body will process the same number of calories from an apple and a cookie entirely differently. Regardless of the source of calories, people who are overweight or obese have consumed more calories than they needed.

The interaction between calorie intake, energy expenditure, and weight is a dynamic one.

- Cutting calories or increasing physical activity leads to weight loss.
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- This is followed by a reduced expenditure of energy because your body is getting smaller.
- During weight loss, your resting metabolic rate slows down. This is an unfortunate overprotective metabolic response to eating less.
- For most people, a sustained energy deficit also is typically followed by an increase in appetite—and consumption of more food.

Successful weight loss isn't just a matter of counting calories. According to the DIETFITS weight-loss study¹, people who really took off a lot of weight changed their relationship with food.

- They ate lots of vegetables and avoided or minimized refined grains and added sugars.
- They chose healthy, whole foods.
- They shopped more at their local farmers' markets.
- They cooked more often at home.
- They avoided eating in the car or in front of a screen.
- They made an effort to eat more mindfully.

Factors other than food, including resting metabolic rate and physical activity, also contribute to weight gain.

How much you move: physical activity



Not getting enough exercise is one of the most important contributors to the high and rising rate of obesity.

- More than 25% of adults do not engage in any kind of leisure-time physical activity. And as people get older, their physical activity tends to wane.
- People who are obese commonly exercise less than people who are of normal weight.
- Added weight can lead to health issues and restrictions on movement. Those in turn can make exercising more challenging.

In addition, some studies suggest that lean people burn more energy doing daily activities than obese people. For example, lean people may be more likely to walk around, rather than sit, while on the phone. They may be relatively more comfortable taking the stairs rather than an elevator or escalator.

On the other hand, the hunger that can accompany burning more calories—or the perception that one deserves food to make up for the extra activity—can prompt overeating.

How you think about food and approach eating

Psychological factors affect eating, exercise, and weight. The message to eat often comes from external cues rather than hunger. For example, noon can mean it's time for lunch, or turning on the television means it's time for ice cream. Mood can determine whether a person feels up to exercising or sticking to a stringent diet.

- Be mindful, and eat only when you are hungry. Stop eating when you are full. You do not need to keep eating just to clean your plate.
- Be mindful of what you ingest. Try to eat healthy foods that fill your body with nutrients.
- Food and emotions are closely linked. Many people use food as a source of comfort or to release tension.

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- In order to sense fullness (reach satiety), people need to eat at a pace that allows the body time to react to the incoming food.
- Eating slowly can lessen the risk of eating past the point at which you would feel full given a few more minutes.

A 2018 Japanese study² found that slow eaters were 42% less likely to be overweight. Normal-speed eaters were 29% less likely to be overweight. Slow and normal eaters also had smaller waist circumferences. Moreover, participants who reported decreasing their eating speed over the six-year observation period showed reductions in weight.

Hormonal abnormalities

Some people believe that an underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism) explains their obesity. Although unexplained weight gain can be a sign of hypothyroidism, obesity is rarely caused by a thyroid disorder.

- In general, only 5 to 10 pounds of body weight can reasonably be attributed to the thyroid, according to the American Thyroid Association.
- The following are other hormone-related conditions that can affect weight:
 - Polycystic ovary syndrome
 - Tumors of the pituitary or adrenal glands
 - Insufficient production of sex hormones
 - Insulin-producing tumors of the pancreas

You can't change a hormonal abnormality on your own. But you can tell your doctor about any issues. If you do have an endocrine issue, your doctor can help address it.

References:

1. Jama, February, 2018.
2. BMJ, 2018.

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