



Maintaining a Healthy Weight

What is obesity?

Obesity is an increasing problem in Britain. Currently over half of women and around two thirds of men in the UK are either overweight or obese. Being overweight increases your risk of various health problems. Heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, high blood pressure, some types of cancer and arthritis are all more likely. Obesity also effects general mobility and breathing.

What causes obesity?

You will become obese if the amount of food energy you eat is more than the amount of energy you burn each day. The unit of energy in food is called a calorie. If the amount of calories you eat and drink equals the amount you burn off each day, your body weight will remain about the same.

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 this is often due to family eating and exercise habits rather than being a hereditary condition.

What is a healthy weight?

The body mass index (BMI) is a value based on a persons height and weight. It is the standard reference measurement used for obesity in the UK. It gives an estimate of the amount of body fat and hence can be used to calculate risk of obesity related illness.

You can calculate your own BMI using the equation:

$$\text{BMI} = \text{weight(Kg)} \div \text{Ht(m)}^2$$

What does the BMI measurement mean?

Underweight (BMI less than 18.5) - Being underweight can be bad for your health. A few people naturally are under weight and are healthy and energetic. Some people purposely restrict their diet to keep thin. They tend to lack energy and can develop a range of health problems also. Professional help is usually required to resolve the issues around eating and help them achieve a healthy weight.

Healthy weight (BMI 18.5 - 24.9) - This is the normal range we should all aim to be. Maintaining this weight through a healthy diet and exercise is the ideal.

Overweight (BMI >25 - 29.9) - People in this range should try to reduce there weight a little. This can be done by increasing exercise or by slightly reducing food portions, and reducing fatty foods and sugar intake.

Obese (BMI >30 - 39.9) or morbidly obese (BMI > 40) - People in this range are at high risk of obesity health related problems. It is important to lose weight through diet and exercise. Professional advice should be sought before taking extreme measures as these patients may have health problems that need monitoring or treating whilst weight reduction is achieved. If the BMI is over 40 the term "morbid obesity" is used. "Morbidly" obese means that the amount you are overweight is harmful to your health.

Limitations of BMI

If you have a lot of muscle, you may have a BMI over 25 but very little body fat and be a healthy weight. 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. Your doctor will be able to guide you as to whether BMI is an accurate measurement for your physique. It also cannot be used in pregnant women and the range does vary for some ethnic groups (eg a BMI of 27.50 for an Asian person has been shown to have a health risk the similar to a BMI of 30 for a white Caucasian person).

Body shape

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

Measuring your waist also gives a rough guide to whether you need to lose excess weight. An at-risk waist measurement is 102cm (40 inches) for men and 89cm (35 inches) for women.

If you are under 150cm (4ft 11 inches) tall, a smaller measurement will apply. Ask your GP or practice nurse for advice if you are worried about your weight.

Body composition

Measuring how much of your body weight is made up of fat and muscle can be a useful way of monitoring your weight. The amount of fat in your body, not your total weight, determines your health risk due to being overweight.

How can I lose excess weight?

To lose excess weight, you need to burn off more calories than you take in from food and drink. This means tipping your energy balance by eating fewer calories, burning more off or, preferably, both. The combination of diet and exercise is the best method. A realistic new weight target is the best. It is best to start with a goal to lose 10 percent of your weight in about three months. Once this has been achieved you can set yourself a new goal.

Which diet is best?

Dramatic and sudden weight loss can be harmful, and your weight is more likely to rebound once you stop dieting. The challenge is to maintain your new weight in the long term. There are numerous diets available and you should choose one that fits in with your lifestyle and only promotes gradual weight loss of 0.5 to 1kg (1 to 2lbs) per week - any more than this and you'll be losing water and muscle, not fat. The diet should encourage you to follow the guidelines for healthy eating - a balanced, varied diet that incorporates all major food groups. Be realistic and flexible enough that you can stick to it - avoid extreme hunger and try to undertake regular physical exercise - such as walking to work.

Making your own changes

You can also lose weight by making your own changes 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 number of calories in your food and drink to 1,000 to 1,500 calories per day, depending on how overweight you are. There are books available to guide you on the calorie intake of foods.

Tips for controlling calories

- Keep a food diary for a week, writing down everything that you eat and drink. Look at it, and work out what foods are simple to substitute. For instance, you could cut 500 calories per day by changing the balance of foods on your plate, eg 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.
- Grill rather than fry food.
- Drink more water, it fills you up.
- Cut down on convenience and ready prepared foods.
- Reduce portion size, using a smaller plate helps!
- 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 and a large glass of wine can provide about 135 calories. You should also limit sugary drinks, because apart from the energy, they have 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.

How can my doctor help?

There are various medicines that your doctor can prescribe to aid weight loss in combination with a low-calorie diet. These are not a quick fix solution, and without lifestyle changes weight is easily regained once stopping. These are usually only prescribed for people with a BMI of over 30 or people at a slightly lower weight with certain existing medical problems.

People with severe obesity (BMI of over 40) can have surgery to bypass the stomach or to make it smaller, if other weight-loss methods have failed. This surgery is not readily available on the NHS in the UK. Your GP will discuss this with you, and be able to indicate what services are available locally.