

healthy

LIVING

WEIGHT MANAGEMENT: THE REAL DEAL

Unless you live in an isolated cave somewhere, you have probably noticed that there are more and more overweight people around. If you haven't seen this with your own eyes, the media are there to enlighten you to this plight with everything from news reports to reality TV shows

We hear plenty about the exploding rate of fat and obese people in our own country and indeed the world over. There are even new terms such as 'globesity' and 'diabesity' which reflect the global and serious affect weight is having on our collective health.

The World Health Organisation predicts that a staggering 2.3 billion adults will be overweight or obese by 2015. While statistics are all well and good, it is important to understand their relevance to us as individuals, you might be thinking: 'why do I need to do anything at all?' The answer is simple: because if you don't, you dramatically increase your chance of ill health. Obesity is now considered the most destructive, avoidable cause of death.

Being overweight is associated with a number of chronic diseases. The higher your BMI* and more specifically, the more fat you have, the higher your risk of developing a lifestyle associated disease.

We often hear cautions about weight management, how eating fast foods, coupled with our lazy lifestyle (think burgers delivered through your car window to prevent exhaustive walking!) contribute to excess weight and we've also been told the way to solve this is to simply eat less and move more. Not bad advice, but what if it doesn't work?
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For many people simply eating less and moving more will make a difference to their weight and overall health. But for some this just won't be enough. For others 'diets' will simply add weight - as we restrict the foods we love for a period of time and then compensate by bingeing on them once the diet is over. We need to learn which foods should be dumped from the diet, and which ones should be included on an everyday basis.

A couple of things happen when we severely restrict our calorie intake:

- 1. We lose weight** - but this is a mixture of some fat along with important muscle tissue. Reducing our muscle mass results in a reduced metabolic rate and the all too familiar yo-yo weight loss/gain cycle
- 2. The body thinks it is starving**, causing it to revert to survival mode which essentially means storing incoming energy as fat.



Obviously it is important not to overeat; estimating reasonable portions, listening to your body's signals to stop eating and not eating just for the sake of eating will all help towards ensuring this. However, it is just as important to eat the right foods; I'm now talking about quality, not quantity.

The food we eat triggers various responses in our body. Food that is high in refined carbohydrates (e.g. white bread, white rice and pasta) and foods high in sugar (e.g. sweet treats, and many fruits) are broken down into a simple sugar called glucose and absorbed into the blood very quickly. The body responds to this surge in blood glucose (blood sugar) by releasing enough insulin to get the glucose out of the blood and into cells for energy, or storage for use later on. The higher the glucose level, the more insulin sent to take care of it.

That may not sound like a problem, but when we continue to eat these foods we can develop something called insulin resistance. Our cells no longer respond to the insulin efficiently and we end up with a reduction of cellular energy, high blood sugar and insulin levels and increased storage of energy. That storage often takes the form of fat. Can you see the picture developing? Poor dietary choices lead to weight gain and disrupted responses from the body, which in turn make weight loss very difficult. Aside from being very frustrating, if left unchecked this situation can result in poor blood sugar management and increase the risk of chronic diseases developing.

By choosing to eat a varied diet with lots of fresh vegetables, quality protein (fish, lean meat and poultry, tofu and eggs), good fats (raw nuts, seeds, olive oil, avocados, coconut, flax seed oil) and a small amount of whole grains you will provide your body with a rich source of nutrients without causing wild fluctuations in blood sugar levels.

Reducing overall carbohydrates, especially refined and sugary carbohydrate foods, can teach the body to respond appropriately to insulin and other signals which ultimately establish healthy metabolism and weight.

Let's not forget about moving more too. Exercise is an essential part of weight management. Regular exercise also assists with maintaining normal blood sugar levels, building muscle mass, keeping your metabolism healthy, heart function, stress management, improving energy and making you feel good - all factors vital for good health and longevity.

So where does this leave us? Hopefully with a clear understanding that maintaining a healthy weight is one of the most important things we can do to improve our health. The best way to do that is to look at not just how much we eat, but more importantly, what we choose to eat, coupled with regular exercise. Remember, these guidelines are not solely for use during a weight management programme but guidelines for daily living if you want to live a healthy, happy, long life.

*BMI = Body Mass Index, a basic measure of body mass using a height to weight ratio. It does not accurately account for lean muscle and body fat.

Sources:

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