

Healthy weight

What is a healthy weight?

Our bodies are all different sizes and we all eat differently; but the basic guide for good health is the same: eat a healthy varied diet and be physically active every day.

What about body weight?

A healthy weight for ‘every body’ is very hard to define. Although we know that increasing body weight is associated with increased risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, the group of diseases known as the metabolic syndrome, and some cancers; this is not the whole story.

For instance, body weight is the most important predictor of developing type 2 diabetes; but lack of exercise, poor diet, smoking, and alcohol use are all associated with increased risk of diabetes, even when body weight is removed from the equation. Body weight is weakly related to risk of heart disease, while other factors like raised blood cholesterol and smoking more strongly predict development of heart disease. In fact, many studies now show that, improving diet quality and increasing physical activity improve health regardless of whether body weight changes or not.

How do I improve my health?

The key to achieving health goals is to have realistic expectations, introduce healthy changes slowly so you can stick to them, accept your body shape/body size, listen to your body, follow a balanced diet but allow yourself the odd reward, and do some physical activity every day.

Starting slowly and having realistic expectations

To stick with a healthy lifestyle change you need to make changes that you can maintain over the long term – start with small steps or a single change, such as cutting down on the number of biscuits each day or meals of fish and chips each week, or taking the dog for a longer walk every day. Once you have comfortably established one habit you can add more changes.

Accepting your body size/body shape

Believe it or not, restrictive dieting (eating less food than you require for the purposes of losing weight) is not very effective at producing weight loss over the long term, and



in many cases results in weight gain. Evidence of health benefits from restrictive dieting is weak, and repeatedly dieting may be bad for your health.

Eating well

At present, when you eat, are you eating for comfort, out of habit, absent-mindedly or just because the food is there? Or do you skip or delay eating if you’re not hungry, or save some for later when you start to get full? Noticing the difference in these behaviours may help you improve your eating behaviour.

Part of eating well is to learn to recognise and respond to hunger and fullness signals, increasing your awareness of physical rather than emotional and environmental signals for eating, and respecting your health by regularly eating a varied and nutritious diet most of the time. Another part of eating well is to allow yourself permission to eat treat foods sometimes.

Unfortunately, as humans, we have been biologically programmed to seek fatty and sugary foods to keep up our energy stores; but as such foods are now easy to find, it is easy to overdo it.

- Mostly choose foods with minimal added fat, particularly saturated fat.
- Choose foods low in salt, and when you use salt choose iodised salt
- Choose foods with little added sugar
- Drink plenty of fluid, especially water
- Limit alcohol to two standard drinks per day and have some alcohol free days to lower the risk for alcohol related ill-health.

A balanced daily diet might include:

Food	Servings	One serving being
Vegetables	at least 3	a medium size potato, ½ cup of cooked vegetables, ½ cup salad
Fruits	at least 2	an apple, orange or half cup of fruit salad
Wholegrain bread, pasta, rice, cereals	at least 6	a slice of bread, a roll, ½ cup of muesli, 1 cup cooked rice, or pasta
Milk and milk products	at least 2	1 cup of low fat milk, a yoghurt pottle, or 2 slices of low fat cheese
Legumes*, nuts, seeds, fish and seafood, eggs, poultry, red meat	at least 2 of legumes and 1 of meat	a chicken breast, small steak, 1 egg or a ¾ cup of cooked beans

*legumes include beans, peas, and lentils.

If you have a health problem, and/or are taking any medication talk to your doctor about proposed changes to your diet and discuss your exercise programme before starting.

A prescription appetite suppressant can be discussed with your doctor. But remember, a healthier diet and moderate exercise will benefit you regardless of your body weight.

Further information and support

Speak to your:

- Doctor, practice nurse or public health nurse
- Local District Health Board and ask for the Public Health Service or a dietitian
- Dietitian or registered nutritionist from the Yellow Pages
- Marae-based health services and/or Maori health workers or Pacific health workers.

Look online:

- National Heart Foundation, www.heartfoundation.org.nz
- Ministry of Health, www.health.govt.nz
- Sport NZ, www.sportnz.org.nz

Physical activity

You can start with 15 minutes of gentle activity a day (eg, walking or gardening). This could then be increased to 30 minutes to an hour of moderate activity (you should be breathing hard but be able to hold a conversation).

If you can manage this only in short bursts – fine – use the stairs not the lift or walk the long way to your car; it all adds up. The trick is to find an activity you enjoy doing and to put a little more physical activity into each day. You can ask your doctor about a ‘Green Prescription’.

Rely on your sense of wellbeing and quality of life, and have regular check-ups with your doctor, rather than using weight loss to monitor health goals. Weight loss is a poor measure of health change – for example, if you are exercising you may put on muscle as you lose fat – so your risk of chronic disease may decrease without a huge difference in your weight. No matter what your body weight is, a healthier diet and moderate exercise will give you health benefits.

Can I get help?

If your eating is out of control or you are distressed or depressed, talk to your doctor. Your doctor may suggest additional help from a dietitian, registered nutritionist or a counsellor.

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