

Fact sheet: Health benefits of losing weight



Being overweight increases the risk of health problems, but what benefits can you expect if you lose weight? Is there an immediate health pay-off, or is it impossible to see quick results? Losing weight and then keeping it off usually takes a lot of motivation, because we really have to change our lifestyles if we want to change our weight for the long term. Changing long-established habits and patterns is hardly ever easy.

If we want to be thinner, not achieving our goals can make us feel bad about ourselves. Being a normal weight is important for our health, but that is not the only issue for many of us. Our society places great importance on how we look, and we can become very unhappy or even depressed if we feel unattractive because of our body size and shape. On the other hand, there is also the view that overweight people just enjoy life and have more fun than other people. Contradictory messages like this are common around weight and weight loss. So what happens emotionally when you lose weight? How many of your problems could losing weight solve?

Unfortunately, despite all the claims about weight and weight loss, there are not many rock-solid answers to these questions. But some of the research could help you sort through the maze of claims and counter-claims about weight loss.

How much weight do you need to lose to get healthier?

Firstly, you do not have to lose weight if you are not genuinely overweight. And weight is not the only important issue either. What is actually most critical is the amount of fat in your body, and where that fat has built up. Muscle, for example, is quite heavy. So if you gain weight because you have increased your muscle bulk, the extra bit of weight is no problem at all.

Two approaches are commonly used to determine if people are overweight: The "body mass index" (BMI) and waist measurement. The BMI helps to determine how much you weigh in relation to your height. Waist measurements give you an idea of how fat is distributed in your body.

The BMI is the most common way to try to work out if people are overweight or obese (very overweight). It is a measure of the relationship between weight and height. People who have a BMI over 30 are considered to be obese. Being obese is a greater risk to health than being overweight. People who have a BMI between 25 and 30 are usually considered to be overweight. Being overweight

alone does not always necessarily cause health problems, but it could be a problem if the person already has certain illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes.

The BMI scale cannot always be used in this way because, for example, a certain BMI is associated with different health risks in people from South Asia compared to people from Europe. The same is true for waist measurements. A waist measurement of 88 cm or more could put European women at a higher risk of health problems, while for European men, more than 102 cm could be a sign of too much belly fat. This is also true even if their weight is within the normal range.

You can get a better idea of how fat is distributed in your body by measuring the relationship between your waist and your hips. If you have a relatively big amount of belly fat, it is more likely to be a health problem. A more "apple-shaped" person with a "beer belly" and narrow hips faces higher health risks than someone who does not have much fat stored around their belly. Abdominal (belly) fat in particular increases your risk of heart disease. If your body fat tends to be stored around your legs, hips and bottom rather than your belly, then it is less likely to be a health problem. This is often called being "pear-shaped", because you are smaller on the top and rounder lower down.

Being too worried about losing weight can itself become a problem. If you are not in fact overweight, but keep losing weight, then you could quickly become unhealthy.

Are there any quick health results that I can get from losing weight?

Being overweight or obese increases your risk of long-term health problems that could shorten your life, like diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Preventing these serious illnesses is often the main health reason why people try to lose weight if they are obese.

Reducing your risk factors for serious life-threatening illnesses is an important health benefit. Many people may feel that the best reward for losing weight is feeling healthier and seeing an improvement. One of the first benefits you might notice is having more energy. If you are losing weight with the help of exercise, your fitness will be increasing. So you could quite quickly be able to climb more stairs without getting out of breath, for instance.

If you have osteoarthritis in the knees, you are likely to experience a quick improvement there too. Being overweight or obese puts stress on your knee joints in particular. If you are overweight for a long time, your risk of osteoarthritis will increase quite a lot too. Losing weight can prevent you developing osteoarthritis of the knee joints. If you already have painful knees, losing weight could relieve the pain.

If you are obese and you have osteoarthritis in your knees, you are likely to notice a moderate to large reduction in disability if you manage to lose 10% of your body weight in three months. But even if you only lose 5% of your body weight in five months, you could still feel a real difference in what your knees can do. If you are 80 kg (176 pounds), then 5% of your body weight would be 4 kg (9 pounds).

One of the other important health benefits could be that your doctor might decide that you can take less of the medication you have been taking, or stop taking it altogether. This may include drugs to lower your blood pressure (antihypertensives) or cholesterol level (statins), insulin for type 2 diabetes and other drugs to lower your blood sugar.

Of course, how you lose the weight also matters: there are healthy and unhealthy ways to lose weight. Some weight-loss drugs have adverse effects that will make some people unhealthier. One drug, rimonabant (brand name: Acomplia) had its license for use in Europe suspended by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) in October 2008 because it caused serious depression. And in January 2010, the authorisation for this drug was suspended by the European Medicines Agency (EMA). EMA had determined that the potential benefits of sibutramine did not outweigh the possible harmful effects, particularly cardiovascular disease.

The latest diet craze in woman's magazines will probably not give you the results you want either. Generally speaking, you lose weight by reducing how much energy you consume (such as calories from fat and carbohydrates in food) and by increasing how much energy you use (by exercising or being more active). If you lose weight but smoke more, the smoking could do more harm to your health than one or two kilogrammes of weight will.

How can I keep the weight off permanently?

Losing weight is hard enough, but keeping it off for the long

term can be just as hard or even harder. To keep weight off permanently, you need to have made some real and sustainable changes to your lifestyle. Because your previous habits led to your being overweight, going back to those habits means the weight would be quite likely to return. This means that it is important to find new habits that you can really live with for the long term: for example, a form of exercise that you enjoy, or that is at least very practical for you to keep up.

One of the main things you can do to keep your weight down is to exercise, as well as change your eating habits. Researchers have found that when people who are overweight or obese lose weight with a combination of diet and exercise, they lose on average 20% more weight than if they only diet. For the people in that research, this meant an average of 3 kg (7 pounds) extra weight loss due to exercise. And this improvement also held over the longer term: a year later, the people who had exercised still weighed less than the people who had only dieted.

It is believed that people really need to be getting at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise on at least five days a week to stay healthy and fit. "Moderate-intensity exercise" means doing something that increases your heart rate. This means that walking very slowly does not count, but walking briskly does. You do not have to exercise so strenuously that you are out of breath, but you do need to exert yourself at least a little to get a benefit.

Brisk walking has been shown to help very inactive people get more exercise into their everyday lives. People who work full-time, for example, would get the recommended 30 minutes of exercise by walking at a fairly brisk pace for 15 minutes to and from work every day. Regular brisk walking has several advantages, such as not needing special equipment and causing fewer injuries than many other forms of exercise.

People who walked on average an extra three hours per week for an average of eight months were able to lose around a kilogramme and 2% of their body fat through the walking alone. They also improved their "cardiovascular fitness" (the strength of their heart and circulation) and there was a small positive impact on their blood pressure. You can read more about that research [here](http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.395.en.html) (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.395.en.html>), and about ways that have been shown to help people walk more here (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.396.en.html>).

How can I keep motivated?

If you are having trouble losing weight and keeping it off, then getting support from your doctor or someone else who encourages your progress could help.

It is important that the changes you make are suited to your fitness and any health problems that you might have. Your doctor could help you consider the options. The key to long-term success is to find ways that are practical for you. You may have to explore several options before you find something that works. If you have already lost weight but get stuck at some point, you might need to try something new to start making progress again.

It is also important not to give up completely, even if you do have setbacks or some difficult times. Seeing a reduction in your waist and losing weight is probably the best feedback to motivate yourself, but it can also be disheartening if nothing is changing.

Some people watch their cholesterol levels as a sign of whether their risk of heart disease is going down, but this is not always a guarantee that your health risks are decreasing. Nevertheless, it can be very encouraging to see measurements like your cholesterol or blood pressure fall.

The health risks that come from being overweight are a complicated combination of factors. This means that health interventions do not necessarily have an immediate effect. For example, losing weight might not always be enough to reduce your blood pressure in the short term. You can read more about the research on this here (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.401.en.html>) . So, just because you are not seeing an immediate result, it does not mean that it is not worthwhile to stick with your new habits.

IQWiG, the research institute that produces this website, is also going to look for research that shows other ways of reducing your blood pressure without drugs. We will update this information as the IQWiG's assessments become available. If you want to keep up with our new information, you can subscribe to our free newsletter here (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/newsletter.489.69.en.html>) .

What if I am losing weight but it does not make me feel as good as I expected?

Many people who lose weight will feel better physically and emotionally. But even if you do not feel better or are disappointed with the results you have achieved, the weight loss could still be making you healthier.

Other ways of losing weight might make you feel happier about yourself. For example, some people feel better with the support they get from a group of others who are also trying to lose weight. Others feel better if they go to group sessions that help them to learn to accept their bodies and improve their body image. Doing regular exercise gives some people a lot of satisfaction and makes them feel emotionally better, but not others.

It is important to remember that you can improve your health in other ways than by losing weight. Extra exercise, even if it is not reducing your weight, could also have other benefits for your wellbeing. You can feel good about yourself and be healthy even if you are not an ideal weight for your height. Getting to know your body and accepting yourself might be more important for your happiness than losing weight.

Some people will have thought for a long time, "I'll feel much better and happier if I just lose some weight...". So if the results they had hoped for do not happen when they lose weight, then they may feel very disappointed. Even though being overweight can cause a lot of problems in your life, the weight itself might not be responsible for all the problems that you think it is. This means that losing weight will not necessarily solve all your problems. Expecting life to become easier by losing weight alone is unrealistic.

It is a difficult thing to lose weight and then keep it off. If you have been able to do it, it is an important achievement. Having done it, you may also find that you are better able to take on other challenges and succeed with them as well.

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Glossary

cholesterol levels

Cholesterol levels are a way of measuring the concentration of cholesterol in the blood. It is often called fat levels, although cholesterol is not really a fat. Fat is found in the tiny droplets that transport cholesterol through the blood. Depending on the type of transport molecule, doctors differentiate between HDL, LDL and VLDL cholesterol. The total level of cholesterol, measured in milligrams per decilitre (mg/dl), combines the individual values of all these types of cholesterol.

statins

Statins are a class of drugs that are described as cholesterol-lowering. Statins affect the metabolism of building blocks of cholesterol in the body, which slows down the production of cholesterol.

depression

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses, and it can be mild, moderate or serious. There are several different types of depression that can be recognised by different signs. Which symptoms of depression occur and how strong and frequent they are vary from person to person. People in any social or age group can be affected, both women and men. If someone has had at least two of the following symptoms for longer than two weeks, it might mean that they are depressed: deep sadness; listlessness; loss of interest in the things they usually care about.

BMI

The Body Mass Index (BMI) is a measurement used to assess body weight. It describes the relationship between a person's weight and height and is calculated using the following formula: $BMI = \text{weight (kg)} / \text{height (m)}^2$. For example, if you are 1.70 m tall and weigh 60 kg, you would calculate your BMI like this: $60 / (1.70 \times 1.70) = 20.76$. So this would mean that you have a BMI of around 21. People who have a BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 are considered to have a normal weight. A BMI below 18.5 is considered to be underweight, and a BMI between 25 and 29.9 is considered to be overweight. People who have a BMI over 30 are considered to be obese. The BMI only says something about people's total body weight, though, and nothing about their body fat. Two people could have the same BMI but a different amount of fat in their bodies. So a

bodybuilder who has a lot of muscle tissue and little fat could have the same BMI as a person who has little muscle tissue and a lot of fat. Still, a BMI over 30 is usually a sign of a high percentage of body fat.

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