

SECTION 8

Maintaining a Healthy Weight

Many studies have shown that slimmer people are less likely to develop cancer. And trimming excess weight may also improve survival after cancer has been diagnosed. Among women with breast cancer, for example, at least 17 different research studies have shown that those who are thinner tend to live longer and have less risk of recurrence.¹

Researchers have not had to look very hard to find reasons to explain this finding. It has long been known that body fat is like a factory producing estrogens (female sex hormones). What happens is that hormones are produced in the adrenal glands (small organs above each kidney) and are then carried through the bloodstream into body fat. There, fat cells convert these hormones into estrogens.¹ In turn, estrogens fuel breast cancer growth, as we saw in Section 1.

That's not all. Both women and men who have more body fat tend to have less of a protein compound called *sex hormone binding globulin* (SHBG) in their blood. SHBG's job is to bind estrogen and testosterone, keeping these hormones inactive and unable to promote cancer. If overweight people have less SHBG, it means that more of their hormones are not reined in. They travel freely in the bloodstream, increasing the risk that cancer will start or, if it has started, will spread to other parts of the body.

Excess weight may also reduce immune defenses. Researchers have shown that overweight people are more likely to show other signs of flagging immunity, such as recurrent infections. Poor immune defenses could mean they are less able to combat cancer cells that may arise.²

Trimming Down the Healthy Way

So how do we slim down? The first key is to focus not on *how much* you eat, but on *what* you eat. It is natural for people seeking to lose weight to skip meals and eat tiny portions. But doing so over even a few weeks tends to slow down your body's calorie-burning speed, making it harder and harder to lose weight. And cutting back on portions can make hunger get out of control, leading to binges and rebound weight gain.

Instead, focus on healthful foods that are naturally modest in calories. The best advice is to build your menu from the New Four Food Groups that we met in

Section 1. Vegetables, fruits, beans, and whole grains are nearly always lower in calories than typical meats, dairy products, eggs, and fried foods. This is partly because they are usually very low in fat. Ounce for ounce, fat has more than twice the calories of carbohydrate or protein. In addition, plant-based foods are so high in fiber, they tend to fill you up before you've taken in too many calories. Studies show that every 14 grams of fiber in your daily diet reduces your calorie intake by about ten percent.³

So, build your diet from the New Four Food Groups. At the same time, avoid animal products and keep vegetable oils to an absolute minimum. In the process, you'll eliminate all animal fat and fiber-depleted foods and dramatically cut your fat intake.

Several studies by the research team at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine have shown that simply using the New Four Food Groups while avoiding animal products and keeping oils to a minimum leads to a weight loss of about one pound per week—week after week after week—even if you *don't exercise*. For example, in a study of 59 postmenopausal women, the diet change caused participants to lose an average of 13 pounds in 14 weeks. The same effect was seen in young women.⁴ And in a study of individuals with type 2 diabetes, participants lost an average of 16 pounds in just 12 weeks.⁵

Many other research studies have reached similar conclusions. You can focus on the type of food you eat—not the amount—and lose weight naturally and safely.

Of course, a slimmer body is not the only benefit of this sort of healthy menu. Low-fat vegetarian and vegan diets have been used to reverse heart disease, bring diabetes under control, lower blood pressure, reduce menstrual and premenstrual symptoms, and achieve many other health goals.⁴⁻⁸

Avoid Risky Diets

Some fad diets have had on-again, off-again popularity but are very unhealthy over the long run. For example, low-carbohydrate, high-protein diets eliminate bread, pasta, beans, rice, starchy vegetables, and other carbohydrate-rich foods and focus instead on meat and eggs. There are several things wrong with such diets.

First, controlled tests show that these diets cause weight loss that is no quicker than that associated with old-fashioned low-calorie diets or with healthy low-fat, vegan diets. All of these regimens lead to a weight reduction of about one pound per week.

Second, when people lose weight with high-protein diets, it is simply because they are eliminating so many other foods that their overall calorie intake drops. If overall calorie intake doesn't drop, they don't lose weight.

Most importantly, high-protein diets are linked to significant problems. Researchers have found that people on these diets lose large amounts of calcium in their urine, and the loss is caused by the massive amounts of protein they are consuming.⁹ Animal protein tends to leach calcium from the bones and send it through the kidneys into the urine. Over the long run, that can lead to osteoporosis.

As we saw in Section 4, meaty diets are linked to higher risk of colon cancer.^{10,11} And high-fat diets in general are linked to poorer survival in individuals diagnosed with cancer.

For individuals battling serious illness—and for anyone else—it is a very good idea to lose excess weight, and it is important to do so in as healthful a way as possible.

Exercise

Exercise burns calories, boosts your metabolism, and helps reduce the stresses that can lead to binge eating. But don't jump into a vigorous regimen too quickly. If you're over 40, significantly overweight, or dealing with any serious medical condition, you should check with your doctor before greatly increasing your physical activity.

When you start an exercise program, it pays to begin slowly. For most people, a brisk walk every day for half an hour—or three times per week for an hour—is a good way to begin.

If you are unable to exercise because of joint problems, cardiac limitations, or any other reason, you'll be glad to know that a low-fat diet based on the New Four Food Groups typically brings weight loss even when people do not exercise. Yes, exercise is a good thing, but it is not essential for weight loss.

Weight-Loss Keys

To summarize, here are the keys to healthy weight loss:

- Build your diet from the New Four Food Groups: vegetables, fruits, beans, and whole grains.
- Avoid animal products and added vegetable oils.

- Add any common multiple vitamin as a source of vitamin B₁₂.
- There are not many fatty plant foods, but it is good to minimize the ones there are—nuts, seeds, avocados, olives, and some soy products.
- Go high-fiber, having plenty of vegetables, fruits, and bean dishes in as natural and unprocessed a state as possible. Choose high-fiber grains, such as brown rice instead of white rice and whole grain bread instead of white bread.
- If your doctor gives you the green light for regular physical activity, be sure to add exercise to your routine. Start slowly. Brisk walking for a half-hour daily or an hour three times a week is a good way to begin. Then gradually increase your regimen.

Meal Planning

If you're aiming to knock off some pounds, this is a great time for a new focus on high-fiber foods. They tend to be very low in fat, so they won't add many calories. And they will fill you up, so you're less likely to overdo it.

If you were to include high-fiber foods at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, what would they be? Here are a few ideas, but think about ones that are most appealing to you:

Breakfast: Old-fashioned oatmeal is a natural choice. A bowl of strawberries or half a cantaloupe will add fiber, too. And, while it might sound a bit odd at first, a serving of chickpeas at breakfast provides plenty of protein and fiber, with very little fat—try it; you'll like it. Whole-grain breads and bran cereals with low-fat soymilk or rice milk will also give you plenty of fiber.

Lunch: Start with salads loaded with fresh vegetables, beans, and low-fat salad dressing. For a hearty lunch, baked beans, lentil soup, or bean burritos are unbeatable. Or try hummus tucked into whole-wheat pita bread with grated carrots, sprouts, and cucumbers, or spread low-fat black bean dip into a whole-wheat tortilla and wrap it with peppers, tomatoes, and lettuce. A side of steamed green vegetables is always a great addition. And, if your tastes call for fresh fruit, a couple of pears or apples will give you loads of fiber with very few calories.

Dinner: For dinner, there are endless choices: vegetable stir-fry over brown rice, a chunky vegetable chili, lentil curry, vegetable fajitas loaded with fat-free "refried" beans and sautéed vegetables, or vegetable lasagna layered with tomato sauce, crumbled tofu, spinach, mushrooms, and cheesy nutritional yeast in place of the usual fatty meat and cheese. Or keep it simple and enjoy whole

wheat pasta with a vegetable-heavy marinara sauce. For dessert, try fresh fruit or a fruit sorbet.

Recommended Recipes

Veggies in a Blanket (page 85)

Sesame Bok Choy and Carrot Stir-Fry (page 122)

Lentil and Artichoke Stew (page 89)

Section 8 References

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