

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Weight Loss and Obesity

Obesity is epidemic in the United States. The number of overweight and obese Americans has grown at a disturbing rate, especially over the past few years; to the point where today more Americans are overweight than are normal weight. In fact, over sixty percent of Americans are now considered to be overweight, with over 30 percent of the population considered to be obese (e.g., overweight by more than 20-30% of recommended weight). These numbers describe a tragic public health situation. Being overweight increases a person's risk of serious illness. A very large (and growing) percentage of citizens are at increased risk for developing serious chronic diseases, and face the prospect of early disability or death as the result of being overweight. Meanwhile the entire society struggles under the burden of the resulting increase in health care costs.

Most everyone wants to be slim and toned, but the reality is that it is far easier to gain weight than to lose it. People who successfully lose weight often motivate themselves to do so by keeping the health benefits of weight loss firmly in mind. Overweight and obese people are at increased risk of developing serious and sometimes life-threatening illnesses as they age, including:

- Heart Disease
- Heart Attack
- Heart Failure
- Coronary Artery Disease (CAD)
- High Blood Pressure
- Angina
- Abnormal heartbeat
- Cholesterol problems (leading to heart disease)
- Elevated LDL ("bad") cholesterol and triglycerides levels
- Lowered beneficial HDL ("good") cholesterol levels,
- Stroke
- Type 2 Diabetes (the kind you develop rather than are born with)
- Cancers (prostate, gallbladder, colorectal, breast, endometrial and kidney)
- Liver problems (such as an enlarged liver, cirrhosis or a fatty liver)
- Gastro esophageal ("Acid") Reflux Disease (GERD)
- Sleep Apnea (Snoring and difficulty breathing while sleeping)
- Asthma Shallow breathing (Pickwickian syndrome which can lead to heart disease)
- Arthritis
- Gallstones (in women)
- Reproductive problems (irregular periods, increased birth defects, especially neural tube defects, and an increased risk of death of the mother and baby).
- Memory and learning problems (in men)

The risk of developing some of these serious illnesses (type 2 diabetes, arthritis) tends to increase as a person gets heavier.

How fat is distributed on the body has important implications for health risks as well. Fat that accumulates around the abdomen and stomach areas (e.g., the so called "beer belly" or "love handle") predicts more serious health problems than does fat that accumulates around the hips and thighs. Men with waist measurements of more than 40 inches or woman with waist measurements greater than 35 inches are at higher risk for developing type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and

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coronary artery disease than are normal weight individuals or those whose fat accumulates around the hips.

Balanced Diet and Exercise Are Key For Sustained Weight Loss

People lose weight when they achieve a negative energy balance; a state that occurs when fewer calories are taken in than are burned up through activities of daily life. There are two ways to create a negative energy balance. One is to eat fewer calories by dieting. The other is to burn more calories through exercise. Most people achieve lasting weight loss by combining both of these approaches.

Diets that result in long term weight loss work because they reduce calories sufficiently to slowly reduce body weight. A pound or two a week is considered to be the fastest, safe rate to lose weight. Generally this result is achieved by removing between 500 to 1000 calories from one's daily diet and exercising strenuously enough to add a several hundred calorie deficit on top of that. It is not advisable to reduce caloric intake to less than 1200 calories per day unless one is being medically supervised. If one has the patience, it is possible to make less drastic cuts in calories so as to reduce weight at a slower rate. Weight lost more slowly in the context of a balanced, nutritional diet tends to stay off better because the weight loss is due to lifestyle changes that one can continue more or less indefinitely.

As people reach their weight loss goals, it is vitally important that they transition themselves to a maintenance diet that is nutritionally balanced and supplied in reasonable portions (if they haven't done so already), and that they begin an exercise program (if they haven't started one already). When one's overall diet is sound, and one's exercise program is burning off unnecessary calories, it will not matter if the occasional treat (a piece of birthday cake, a steak, or a holiday meal) passes one's lips.