
DIETING & WEIGHT LOSS

FACTS & FICTION

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National Eating Disorder Information Centre

www.nedic.ca

WHY DIET?

DiETING is overwhelmingly common, and most people engage in this behaviour because they think that they are “overweight”. However, the reality in Canada is that:

38% of adults ages 18 to 79 are “normal weight” or “underweight” according to their body mass index.*

14% of “normal weight” youth in grades 9 to 12 perceive themselves as “overweight”.

Approximately 50% of “normal weight” adolescent girls are trying to lose weight.

Clearly not all of those who diet do so because they *are* fat. They may just *feel* fat, which has become a way to express feeling *bad*. Given the prevalence of fatphobia in our culture, with fatness being tightly associated with a host of negative characteristics including gluttony, laziness, and lack of discipline, it is no wonder why this is so.

Living in a culture in which we are often unfortunately judged by our appearance, it makes sense that we want to “fit in” and look our best. In doing so, we feel better about ourselves. Cultural messages about body size, weight, and shape have led many of us to equate being thin and toned with being healthy, happy, in control, and successful.

However, these attributes don’t automatically come to us by way of our physical shape and size. They are determined by many things, such as healthy self-esteem based on what we achieve, activities in which we participate, and how we value ourselves and others.

Still, we go on restrictive diets to lose weight. *Why?*

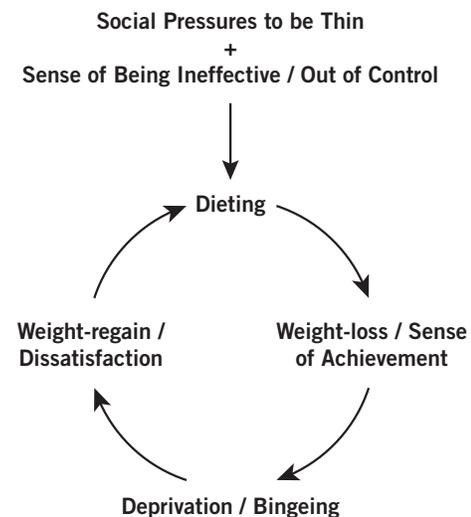
We are flooded with messages that lead us to believe that we can shape our lives by shaping our appearance. We are told that, when we feel unloved, inadequate, ineffective, or out of control in our lives, we can improve our circumstances by changing ourselves. For many of us, this takes the form of dieting.

If we don’t look deeper to identify the basic problem or have effective ways to deal with feeling unloved, inadequate, ineffective, and so on, we tend to displace our unhappiness on to our bodies. And we feel *fat*. So we decide to lose weight in order to feel better.

We’re also told that being fat is unhealthy, so we may go on a diet because we believe that weight loss will improve our health. (And sometimes we convince ourselves that concern for our health, not a desire to “look better”, is the real reason we’re dieting.)

THE DIETING CYCLE

- Weight loss often makes us feel better about ourselves by giving us a sense of accomplishment and self-control.
- Over time, dieting leads to malnourishment, our bodies respond by conserving energy, and weight loss slows or stops.
- We feel deprived of a normal existence as dieting robs us of enjoyable mealtimes, isolates us socially, and malnourishment induces mood swings, preoccupation with food, and urges to binge.
- The diet fails and we begin to regain the lost weight.
- The initial problems that we were experiencing are still there. And now we also feel like a failure for not losing enough weight, or not keeping it off. So we go on another diet.



FACTS

- Anyone who goes on a restrictive diet will initially lose weight (often mostly water, not fat).
- Dieting can lead to weight gain through lowered basal metabolic rate.
- Dieting can lead to bingeing and eating disorders.
- Dieting can cause depression, mood swings, reduced sexual interest, and impaired concentration and judgment. With severe weight loss, anemia, higher risk of infertility, hair loss, loss of muscle tissue, and changes in cardiac and liver functioning are some of the potential consequences.
- Weight-cycling is associated with negative health outcomes. People who repeatedly lose and gain weight are at higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease and metabolic syndrome than those whose weight remains stable.

* While it is very widely employed, the body mass index is not a useful clinical tool and these weight categories should not be considered means for assessing an individual's health.

WHAT CAN YOU LOSE ON A DIET?

- Your sense of humour.
- Muscle and lean tissue.
- Water, resulting in dehydration.
- Lots of money on diet products.
- Time and energy that could have gone into doing things you enjoyed and that would have built up your self-esteem.

DOES THIS MEAN THAT IT IS OKAY TO BE FAT?

Yes. There is a wonderful amount of diversity that is inherent among human beings. Bodies come in a range of sizes, weights, and shapes. Some people are naturally fat, others are naturally thin, and many are in between. We each inherit a genetic set-point that our bodies strive to maintain. In general, with a healthy lifestyle, our weight settles at this set-point (small fluctuations within and between days are normal).

Your body will do best when it's allowed to remain within its natural set-point range. There is no magic way to determine your natural weight. If you have been dieting, normal eating and physical activity over a six-month to one-year period will allow your metabolism to heal and your weight to stabilize. The weight at which your body is *meant* to be may not match the weight at which you would *like* to be, but remember that dieting will keep you from living life to its fullest.

TOP TEN REASONS TO GIVE UP DIETING

Diets don't work. Even if you lose weight, you will probably gain it all back.

Diets are expensive. By not buying special diet products, you could save enough to get new clothes that fit your body as it is, which could improve your outlook right now.

Diets are boring. People on diets talk and think about food and practically nothing else. There's a lot more to life.

Diets don't necessarily improve your health. Like the weight loss, health improvement is temporary. Dieting can actually cause health problems.

Diets don't make you beautiful. Being unique, confident, and good to others make you beautiful.

Diets are not sexy. Taking care of your body helps you feel and look your best.

Diets can turn into eating disorders. Food restriction fueled by an obsession to be thinner can lead to anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, or binge-eating disorder.

Diets can make you afraid of food. Food nourishes and comforts us, and gives us pleasure. Dieting can make food seem like your enemy, and can deprive you of all the positive things about food.

Diets can rob you of energy. If you want to lead a full and active life, you need to provide your body with adequate food and nutrition.

Learning to like and accept yourself *just as you are* will give you self-confidence, better health, and a sense of well-being that will last a lifetime.

*Adapted: Council on Size and Weight Discrimination Inc.
P.O. Box 305, Mt Marion, NY 12456*

HOW CAN YOU LOOK AND FEEL YOUR BEST?

- Nourish your body with a wide variety of foods. There are no good or bad foods, just foods with different nutrition profiles – they all have a place in your life.
- Eat at least three meals a day, with snacks in between to meet energy needs.
- Trust your body: learn to identify hunger and satiety, and eat in response to these cues.
- Be flexible and recognize that it takes time to establish new, healthy habits.
- Include regular physical activity in your life, but remember that over-exercising can be as harmful as dieting. Make it sustainable and enjoyable.
- Nurture yourself and treat yourself well. This means taking care of your physical as well as emotional needs.
- Learn about yourself: explore who you are and how you can help yourself.
- Challenge fat prejudice in yourself and in others because it hurts everyone, regardless of their size.

National Eating Disorder Information Centre

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