



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Weight and Health

People who are overweight or obese tend to have higher blood pressure and higher blood cholesterol levels than others, and are more likely to develop heart disease, diabetes or a stroke. The main way to lose weight and improve health is to change eating habits and increase physical activity.

Simple guides for assessing body weight and the amount and distribution of body fat include:

- Body Mass Index (BMI) – a ratio of weight to height (kg/m²)
- Waist circumference – a measure of abdominal fat
- Waist to Hip Ratio (WHR) – the ratio of waist circumference to hip circumference.

A doctor or pharmacist can help calculate these measurements and explain what your results might mean.

Overweight

People who are overweight have too much body fat. Excess fat around the waist ('apple shaped') is more of a health risk than excess fat around the hips and thighs ('pear shaped').

Overweight people are more likely to develop a range of medical conditions including:

- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- High blood cholesterol
- Some cancers
- Type 2 diabetes
- Stroke
- Joint problems (e.g., osteoarthritis, gout)
- Gall bladder disease
- Sleep apnoea
- Asthma and other breathing problems.

Excess weight can also lead to social problems (e.g., poorer job prospects, low self esteem) and can make many activities more difficult.

Most people put on weight because they eat and drink more calories or kilojoules (kJ) of food energy than their body needs and uses. The 'excess energy' they eat and drink builds up in their body as fat. Certain medical conditions and some medicines can also contribute to weight gain.

To reach and maintain a healthy weight, health authorities recommend 'healthy eating' to reduce energy intake (eating less calories/kJ of food) and 'regular physical activity' to use up energy.

Self care

Weight loss should be gradual (e.g., 1kg per month to ensure fat is lost, rather than muscle or water).

Healthy eating

Healthy eating means balancing the food you eat to get the amount of energy and nutrients that your body needs.

A healthy diet means:

- Mainly grain-based and plant-based foods (e.g., bread, pasta, noodles, rice, cereals, fruits, vegetables, legumes)
- Moderate amounts of lean meat, fish, skinless poultry, eggs and reduced fat dairy foods (e.g., milk, yoghurt, cheese)
- Small amounts of oils and fats (preferably polyunsaturated or monounsaturated oils and fats). Fat supplies twice as much energy as carbohydrate or protein, so eating less fat is an important way to reduce energy intake
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises otherwise).

To control your weight:

- Limit the amount of high energy foods and drinks you consume. High energy foods include high fat, high sugar and highly refined foods (e.g., pastries, pies, pizzas, hamburgers, chips, cream, creamy sauces, butter, sweets, cakes, biscuits, chocolate, soft drinks)
- Limit foods and drinks high in salt. Do not add salt to food
- Limit alcohol to one or two drinks a day. Have at least two alcohol-free days a week
- Eat smaller portions, eat slowly and stop eating when comfortably full
- Eat regular meals each day, do not snack between meals.

Physical activity

As you exercise your body uses energy and regular exercise will use up fat and build muscle. Your body shape will change, even if you do not lose weight.

- Start slowly by using every day events to increase your activity (e.g., take the stairs, park the car 10 minutes away from work).
- Do active things you enjoy and will want to continue.
- For general health and wellbeing, health authorities recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on all or most days of the week. For management of overweight and obesity more physical activity may be needed.

If you have not exercised for a while, check with your doctor before starting.

Medicines for weight loss

Medicines can help with weight loss. They work best if combined with healthy eating and physical activity. Some drug companies offer customer support programs that can increase the chances of successful weight loss.

Effective weight loss medicines include:

- **Orlistat** (*Xenical*) – reduces fat absorption in the stomach and intestine. When taken with a meal, it can prevent absorption of 30% of the fat in the meal. Orlistat may be purchased from pharmacies, on the recommendation of a pharmacist

Important

- Set a realistic goal for weight loss.
 - Make healthy diet changes that you can continue.
 - Start a regular exercise routine that you can continue.
 - Healthy weight loss takes time. Avoid 'crash' diets.
 - Ask a doctor or pharmacist about weight loss medicines.
- **Prescription Medicines** (e.g., sibutramine) – work in the brain to reduce appetite. Ask a doctor for advice.

Other treatments for weight loss

- **Meal replacement products** – are balanced liquid meals, with a very low calorie content. Ask a pharmacist or dietician for advice.
- **Surgery** – is sometimes appropriate and helpful.
- Many herbal products and diet supplements are marketed as weight control medicines, but the effectiveness of many of these products has not been scientifically proven.

Related fact cards

- *Alcohol*
- *Exercise and the Heart*
- *Fat and Cholesterol*
- *Fibre and Bowel Health*
- *High Blood Pressure*
- *Osteoarthritis*
- *Diabetes Type 2*
- *Vitamins*

For more information

Building a Healthy and Active Australia – website www.healthyactive.gov.au

Dietitians Association of Australia – listed under 'D' in the white pages of the phone book or website www.daa.asn.au

Heart Foundation of Australia – phone 1300 36 27 87 or website www.heartfoundation.com.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist