

The Women's Health Research Program

Health Bulletin
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Taking control of your weight

As a society we are starting to accept being overweight as the norm. However this comes at a tremendous cost – a health cost for individuals and society. Being overweight reduces life expectancy and increases the number of years of a poor health.

- For every 1 kg gained from age 18, a women's odds of surviving past 70 years drops five per cent;
- Women who are already overweight at age 18 and then gain more than 10 kilograms later in life only have about a 20 per cent chance of surviving to age 70 in good health;
- The most common diseases will be cancer, heart disease, diabetes and dementia. In fact most women don't realise that being over weight increases the risk of breast cancer by 20 per cent, and being obese increases the risk of breast cancer by 40 per cent.

How do we define a healthy weight?

There are two estimates of healthy weight: **Body mass index**, or BMI for short, which is calculated as a: $\frac{\text{person's weight in kilograms}}{\text{height in metres}^2}$

A **normal BMI** is between **19–25 kg/m²**
Overweight is a BMI **greater than 25 up to 30 kg/m²**
Obesity is a BMI **greater than 30 kg/m²**

Waist circumference:

This is simply measuring your waistline with a tape measure. For women, over 31 inches (about 80cm) indicates moderate increased health risk. Over 35 inches (about 90cm) indicates substantially increased risk.

For most women the battle of the bulge is a lifestyle issue, and often a lifelong chore. Many women try a vast array of diets with varying success. Diets that require extreme food restriction often result in significant weight loss which is followed by a rebound weight gain after the dieting period has ended.

Hints for achieving a healthy weight:

Don't blame/punish yourself for being overweight, just decide to do something about it.

The changes you make in food choices and activity **need to be seen as lifelong**, not a quick fix.

Eat smaller portions: in general Australian people eat much greater portions than they really need.

Avoid processed food: try to buy fresh food, choosing fruit and vegetables in season and be prepared to spend some time planning and preparing meals.

Limit carbohydrate: high sugar intake stimulates insulin release. One of the functions of insulin is to take sugar from the blood and shift it into cells for fat storage. More insulin = more fat.

Avoid processed food that has been sweetened with **fructose or high fructose corn syrup**. High fructose intake is deposited in the liver as fat, and ultimately will lead to the development of a fatty liver, and subsequently diabetes. High fructose processed foods are also linked to gout and hypertension. Avoiding fructose also means avoiding soft drinks, cordials and fruit drinks high in fructose.

Increase your activity: This does not have to be working out in the gym, but should be doing something that you enjoy on a regular basis.

Being physically active helps because:

1. It **makes your muscles more sensitive to insulin**. So you make less insulin. So there's less insulin in your blood to shunt sugar to fat.
2. Exercise **reduces cortisol** levels = less fat deposited.
3. It **helps your body handle fructose**.

- Walk at every opportunity
- Increase 'incidental' activity
- Reduce TV and computer time
- Find an activity you enjoy – dancing, yoga etc
- Allow time for exercise – make it a pleasure not a chore

Drink less alcohol: Almost 30 per cent of Victorian women report drinking alcohol at levels that place them at risk of short-term alcohol related harm. Alcohol is loaded with calories and makes you feel hungry.

Get Involved in Research

Antidepressants ruining your sex drive?

Are you aged between 35–55 years, have been taking a stable dose of one of SSRIs (sertraline, citalopram, paroxetine, fluoxetine or fluvoxamine) or SNRIs (venlafaxine) for the past three months and are experiencing sexual difficulties and for which you would like to be treated.

If you would like more information, regarding this and other studies please visit our website <http://womenshealth.med.monash.edu.au> or contact the Women's Health Research Program on 03 9903 0820 or by email on: womens.health@monash.edu.

Information provided might not be relevant to a particular person's circumstances and should always be discussed with that person's own healthcare provider.



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