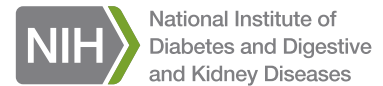


Choosing a Safe and Successful Weight-loss Program

U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services



WIN *Weight-control Information Network*

Introduction

Do you need to lose weight? Have you been thinking about trying a weight-loss program? Diets and programs that promise to help you lose weight are advertised everywhere—through magazines and newspapers, radio, TV, and websites. Are these programs safe? Will they work for you?

This fact sheet provides tips on how to identify a weight-loss program that may help you lose weight safely and keep the weight off over time. It also suggests ways to talk to your health care provider about your weight. He or she may be able to help you control your weight by making changes to your eating and physical activity habits. If these changes are not enough, you may want to consider a weight-loss program or other types of treatment.

Where do I start?

Talking to your health care provider about your weight is an important first step. Doctors do not always address issues such as healthy eating, physical activity, and weight control during general office visits. It is important for you to bring up these issues to get the help you need. Even if you feel uneasy talking about your weight with your doctor, remember that he or she is there to help you improve your health.

Prepare for the visit:

- Write down your questions in advance.
- Bring pen and paper to take notes.
- Invite a family member or friend along for support if this will make you feel better.

Talk to your doctor about safe and effective ways to control your weight. (See below for sample questions.)

He or she can review any medical problems that you have and any drugs that you take to help you set goals for controlling your weight. Make sure you understand what your doctor is saying. Ask questions if you do not understand something.

Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider

About your weight

- What is a healthy weight for me?
- Do I need to lose weight?
- How much weight should I lose?
- Could my extra weight be caused by a health problem or by a medicine I am taking?

About ways to lose weight

- What kind of eating habits may help me control my weight?
- How much physical activity do I need?
- How can I exercise safely?
- Could a weight-loss program help me?
- Should I take weight-loss drugs?
- Is weight-loss surgery right for me?

You may want to ask your doctor to recommend a weight-loss program or specialist. If you do start a weight-loss program, discuss your choice of program with your doctor, especially if you have any health problems.

What should I look for in a weight-loss program?

Successful, long-term weight control must focus on your overall health, not just on what you eat. Changing your lifestyle is not easy, but adopting healthy habits may help you manage your weight in the long run.

Effective weight-loss programs include ways to keep the weight off for good. These programs promote healthy behaviors that help you lose weight and that you can stick with every day.

Safe and effective weight-loss programs should include

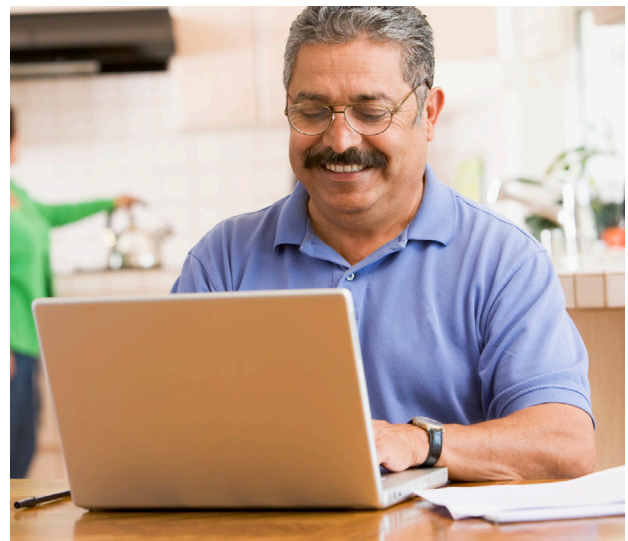
- a plan to keep the weight off over the long run
- guidance on how to develop healthier eating and physical activity habits
- ongoing feedback, monitoring, and support
- slow and steady weight-loss goals—usually $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 pounds per week (though weight loss may be faster at the start of a program)

Some weight-loss programs may use very low-calorie diets (up to 800 calories per day) to promote rapid weight loss among people who have a lot of excess weight. This type of diet requires close medical supervision through frequent office visits and medical tests. For more guidance on this type of diet, read the WIN fact sheet *Very Low-calorie Diets*, listed in the Resources section.

What if the program is offered online?

Many weight-loss programs are now being offered online—either fully or partly. Not much is known about how well these programs work. However, experts suggest that online weight-loss programs should provide the following:

- structured, weekly lessons offered online or by podcasts
- support tailored to your personal goals
- self-monitoring of eating and physical activity using handheld devices, such as cell phones or online journals
- regular feedback from a counselor on goals, progress, and results, given by email, phone, or text messages
- social support from a group through bulletin boards, chat rooms, and/or online meetings



Whether the program is online or in person, you should get as much background as you can before deciding to join.

What questions should I ask about the program?

Professionals working for weight-loss programs should be able to answer questions about the program's features, safety, costs, and results. The following are sample questions you may want to ask.

What does the weight-loss program include?

- Does the program offer group classes or one-on-one counseling that will help me develop healthier habits?



- Do I have to follow a specific meal plan or keep food records?
- Do I have to buy special meals or supplements?
- If the program requires special foods, can I make changes based on my likes, dislikes, and food allergies (if any)?
- Will the program help me be more physically active, follow a specific physical activity plan, or provide exercise guidelines?
- Will the program work with my lifestyle and cultural needs? Does the program provide ways to deal with such issues as social or holiday eating, changes to work schedules, lack of motivation, and injury or illness?
- Does the program include a plan to help me keep the weight off once I've lost weight?

What are the staff credentials?

- Who supervises the program?
- What type of weight-control certifications, education, experience, and training do the staff have?

If it seems too good to be true...it probably is!

In choosing a weight-loss program, watch out for these false claims:

- Lose weight without diet or exercise!
- Lose weight while eating all of your favorite foods!
- Lose 30 pounds in 30 days!
- Lose weight in specific problem areas of your body!

Other warning signs include

- very small print
- asterisks and footnotes
- before-and-after photos that seem too good to be true

For more background on false claims used by some weight-loss programs and products, see the items from the Federal Trade Commission listed in the Resources section at the end of this fact sheet.

Does the product or program carry any risks?

- Could the program hurt me?
- Could the suggested drugs or supplements harm my health?
- Do the people involved in the program get to talk with a doctor?
- Does a doctor or other certified health professional run the program?
- Will the program's doctor or staff work with my health care provider if needed (for example, to address how the program may affect an existing medical issue)?
- Is there ongoing input and follow-up from a health care provider to ensure my safety while I take part in the program?



How much does the program cost?

- What is the total cost of the program?
- Are there other costs, such as membership fees, fees for weekly visits, and payments for food, meal replacements, supplements, or other products?
- Are there other fees for medical tests?
- Are there fees for a follow-up program after I lose weight?

What results do people in the program typically have?

- How much weight does the average person lose?
- How long does the average person keep the weight off?
- Do you have written information on these results?

What if I need more help?

For more tips on how to choose a safe and effective weight-loss program, see the Federal Trade Commission items listed in the Resources section of this fact sheet.

If a weight-loss program is not a good option for you, ask your health care provider about other types of treatment. Prescription drugs, combined with lifestyle changes, may help some people lose weight. For some people who have obesity, bariatric surgery on the stomach and/or intestines may be an option. See the Resources section for more information on these two types of treatment.

Research

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) conducts and supports a broad range of basic and clinical obesity research. More information about obesity research is available at <http://www.obesityresearch.nih.gov>.

Clinical trials are research studies involving people. Clinical trials look at safe and effective new ways to prevent, detect, or treat disease. Researchers also use clinical trials to look at other aspects of care, such as improving the quality of life for people with chronic illnesses. To learn more about clinical trials, why they matter, and how to participate, visit the NIH Clinical Research Trials and You website at <http://www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials>. For information about current studies, visit <http://www.ClinicalTrials.gov>.

Resources

Additional Reading from the Weight-control Information Network

The following publications are available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications> and also by calling WIN toll-free at 1-877-946-4627:

- **Active at Any Size** explains the benefits of regular physical activity and describes activities that people who are overweight or obese can enjoy safely (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/active.htm>).
- **Bariatric Surgery for Severe Obesity** explains how this operation on the stomach and/or intestines helps patients with extreme obesity to lose weight. Patients may use this fact sheet to talk about this option with their health care providers. This fact sheet explains which patients might choose this option and describes the different types of bariatric surgery (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/gastric.htm>).
- **Better Health and You: Tips for Adults** helps adults plan steps toward consuming healthier foods and beverages and being more physically active. Featuring a tear-off tip sheet perfect for posting on your fridge, this brochure also explains the benefits of getting healthy and the harmful effects of being overweight (available online at http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/better_health.htm).
- **Prescription Medications for the Treatment of Obesity** discusses weight-loss medication and how it should always be combined with a plan to consume healthy foods and beverages and engage in regular physical activity (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/prescription.htm>).
- **Tips to Help You Get Active** offers tips to help readers become more physically active, overcome barriers to activity, and stay motivated (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/tips.htm>).
- **Very Low-calorie Diets** explains this monitored weight-loss option and helps health care professionals decide which patients might benefit from it (available online at http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/low_calorie.htm).

Additional Resources

- **2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans**
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
<http://www.health.gov/paguidelines>
- **MyPlate**
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)
<http://www.choosemyplate.gov>
- **Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010**
USDA and HHS
<http://www.health.gov/DietaryGuidelines>
- **Red Flag: Bogus Weight-loss Claims**
Federal Trade Commission
<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/redflag>
- **Weighing the Evidence in Diet Ads**
Federal Trade Commission
<http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0061-weighing-claims-diet-ads>

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<http://www.facebook.com/win.niddk.nih.gov>

The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) is a national information service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). WIN provides the general public, health professionals, and the media with science-based, up-to-date, culturally relevant materials and tips. Topics include how to consume healthy foods and beverages, barriers to physical activity, portion control, and eating and physical activity myths. Publications produced by WIN are carefully reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts.

This publication is not copyrighted. WIN encourages you to copy and share as many copies as desired. This brochure is also available at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov>.

You may also find additional information about this topic by visiting MedlinePlus at <http://www.medlineplus.gov>.

Inclusion of resources is for information only and does not imply endorsement by NIDDK or WIN.

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