

Chapter 9. The Balancing Act: Food and Physical Activity

Staying at—or getting to—a healthy weight helps us in several ways. Remember: Not only does it help us get to that “better me,” but research shows it plays an important role in reducing the risk of several types of chronic diseases. In chapter 4, “Where to Start,” you identified what your healthy weight range is and wrote it down in “My Personal Profile.” This chapter will focus on finding the balance between food and physical activity and reaching or maintaining a healthy weight.

If you are overweight or obese, you are not alone. Many of us are. In fact, in the United States, two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese. That is why many of us need to eat fewer calories, be more physically active, and make wiser food choices. What we are going to do in this chapter is sum up the information you have already learned so you can see where you can take small steps to decrease the number of calories you consume if you need to lose weight. We are going to introduce physical activity to you as part of the “energy balance” equation. You will learn more about that in the next chapter.

Losing weight, gaining life

Lifestyle changes in diet and physical activity are the healthiest choices for weight loss. To lose weight, many of us need a reduction in 500 calories or more per day from food and drink. In addition, increasing physical activity is also important. Remember: To lose weight, calories in must be less than calories out.

When it comes to weight control, it is calories that count—not the proportions of fat, carbohydrates, and protein in the diet. Diets that provide very low or very high amounts of protein, carbohydrates, or fat are likely not providing enough of some nutrients—that is why they are not advisable for long-term use. Although these kinds of weight-loss diets have been shown to result in weight loss, maintaining weight loss ultimately depends on a change in your lifestyle. A healthy lifestyle is about more than just your weight—it is also about feeling better and reducing your risk of chronic diseases.



tip

Prevent gradual weight gain!

For most adults, cutting back 50 to 100 calories per day may prevent the gradual weight gain that comes as we get older.

“Energy balance”

To maintain your body weight, the energy that you expend through your daily activities (for example, breathing, sleeping, and moving around) and additional physical activities has to equal the energy (food and drink) that you consume as calories. If these two things—energy use and energy consumption—are equal, then you are in “energy balance.” If you want to lose weight, you will have to either increase the amount of energy expended through additional physical activities or decrease the calories that you consume, or both. Be careful to still get all the nutrients that you need if you decide to eat fewer calories to tip the energy balance. You will get these important vitamins and minerals if you follow the food group recommendations in “My Healthy Eating Plan.” The recommendations provide the right proportions of fat, carbohydrates, and protein for good health. Remember: It is always important to eat foods that are high in nutrients for the number of calories they contain, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent milk products.

We know it’s difficult to lose weight; it is better not to gain it in the first place. Since many of us tend to gain weight slowly as we age, small decreases in calorie intake can help avoid that slow weight gain, especially when accompanied by increased physical activity. Remember: 3,500 calories equals 1 pound. For most adults, a reduction of 50 to 100 calories per day from foods and beverages may prevent gradual weight gain.

Calorie-lowering strategies

The healthiest way to reduce calorie intake is to reduce intake of added sugars, saturated and *trans* fats, and alcohol, which all provide calories but few or no “good for you” nutrients. You already know about added sugars and unhealthy fats. You learned about them in chapters 7 and 8. Let’s spend some time discussing alcohol—because it can be a simple way to cut calories out of your diet.

Alcoholic beverages supply calories but few essential nutrients. The next page has a table to help you estimate the calories from various alcoholic beverages. Calories are provided for serving volume of beer, wine, and distilled spirits. Higher alcohol content (higher percent alcohol or higher proof), and mixing alcohol with other beverages, such as sugar-sweetened soft drinks or tonic water, fruit juice, or cream, increases the number of calories in the beverage. You can find information on the health effects of consuming alcohol on page 309, in part V.

As you can see from the table below, each drink has about 100 calories. Remember: You need to reduce your food and drink intake by 3,500 calories or burn 3,500 calories without increasing food intake to lose a pound. If you have one light beer each day, that is 100 extra calories! A cocktail made with a sugar-sweetened mixer could be twice that number of calories or more!

Beverage	Approximate Calories (per 1 fluid oz)	Example Serving Volume	Approximate Total Calories
Beer (regular)	12	12 oz	144
Beer (light)	9	12 oz	108
White wine	20	5 oz	100
Red wine	21	5 oz	105
Sweet dessert wine	47	3 oz	141
80-proof distilled spirits (gin, rum, vodka, and whiskey)	64	1.5 oz	96

The same goes for those of us who drink sugar-sweetened beverages without any alcohol. Many of them have at least 150 calories in 1 serving—usually one 12-fluid ounce can. But often, these beverages come in larger bottles, and we drink the entire bottle—easily 300 to 500 unnecessary calories. If you have one 20-ounce sugar-sweetened beverage each day, in 2 weeks, it can add up to over 3,500 excess calories—or a weight gain of 1 pound.

Another way to reduce calorie intake is to eat foods that are low in calories for the amount of food eaten. Examples of these foods are many kinds of vegetables and fruits and some soups. If a soup is made with cream, it will not count toward this strategy (SORRY), but to double the impact, a soup made with low-sodium broth and packed with vegetables can be low in calories, packed with nutrients, and filling too! Just watch out for the salt content. Remember: It is always important to eat foods that are high in nutrients for the number of calories they contain, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent milk products.

One more way to reduce calorie intake is to evaluate the portion size of foods. We already know, portion size is the amount of food eaten at one sitting—and, in general, portion size has increased significantly over the past two decades.

For example, the muffin you ate at work 5 years ago may have had 300 calories, but today's muffins are typically larger and may contain up to 500 calories. You may have not noticed the increase—but it could be 200 extra calories! And, science shows us that controlling portion size helps limit calorie intake, particularly when eating calorie-dense foods (foods that are high in calories for a given measure of food). Therefore, it is essential that we understand how portion size—the amount you eat—compares to a recommended standard amount of food (that is, a serving) from each food group at a specific calorie level. Understanding serving size and portion size is important in following “My Healthy Eating Plan.” When using packaged foods with a Nutrition Facts label, pay attention to the serving sizes and how they compare to the food amounts in the DASH Eating Plan and USDA Food Guide (in appendix A); you will be surprised!

SOUND BITES:

READ FOOD PACKAGES TO MAKE SMART FOOD CHOICES.

Use the Nutrition Facts label. Most packaged foods have a Nutrition Facts label. Use this tool to make smart food choices and to find information about the amount of calories and nutrients you are eating.

Know your portion size. Controlling portion size helps limit calorie intake, particularly when eating foods that are high in calories. When you eat packaged foods, use the Nutrition Facts label to check servings and calories as noted above. When eating whole foods or packaged foods without labels, pay attention to how the portion size compares to a recommended amount of food from each food group.

Read the ingredient list. Ingredients are listed in order by weight from most to least. Make sure those ingredients you want more of, such as whole grains (for example, whole wheat), are listed first. Make sure ingredients you want to eat less of, like added sugars, are not one of the first few ingredients. Remember: Some names for added sugars (caloric sweeteners) include: sucrose, high fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, corn sweetener, maple syrup, honey, and molasses.

Check for claims on the front of food packages. The labels of some food products have a variety of claims that you can use to help manage your weight such as “low calorie,” “lite,” “low fat,” “reduced fat,” or “reduced sugar.”

Write it down.

One technique that is useful in looking for ways to cut calories from foods is to write down what we eat. Do it for 1 day. This means writing down everything you eat, along with an estimate of the amount you eat—this time be realistic. If you put a pat of butter on your toast, write down both the toast and a teaspoon of butter—that is, if your pat was a teaspoon! How do you know how much of a food you are eating? Take a minute to look in your cabinet. Find your measuring spoons and cups. Next, find something familiar that you can use to eyeball measurements that you will remember.



tip

For some of us, our thumbprint is about the size of a teaspoon; for others, our thumbprint is about the size of a tablespoon. Try it and see! Another example is our fist. For some of us, our fist is about the size of a $\frac{1}{2}$ cup, and for others, it is 1 cup. It doesn't need to be exact, this is just an estimate—and it will help you estimate how much food you are eating.

In part III, “Making a Healthier You Happen,” we have included worksheets for you to write down the food you eat in 1 day, for a couple of days. Once you do this, you can look at those foods and find ways that work for you to cut 100 calories here and 100 calories there. Some of the tips we have provided can work for you, but you can also come up with more ways. For example, could you leave the jelly or butter off your morning toast? Use less salad dressing? Avoid high-calorie sauces at dinner-time? Maybe these aren't things that you do every time you eat a food. Do what works for you, but be realistic. A realistic rate of weight loss is $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 pounds per week.

Be more active.

Eating fewer calories, of course, is just one side of the equation. Calorie output needs to be in balance with calorie intake to maintain body weight. That means the calories “burned” during physical activity (in addition to activities of daily living) need to be the same as the calories taken in as food. Here are a few recommendations about how much physical activity we should be doing and how “hard” we

should be performing. Don't worry if there are confusing terms; we'll get into the details in the next chapter. But since we have been talking energy balance, we can't wrap up the discussion without talking about physical activity a little bit. So, here we go! For health purposes, all adults should engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days of the week. This recommended amount of activity is in addition to light-intensity routine activities of daily living and physical activity of less than 10 minutes. However, to prevent weight gain, adults may need up to 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity activity on most days of the week while at the same time not eating more calories than required. To sustain weight loss, adults may need as much as 60 to 90 minutes of moderately intense physical activity per day while not eating too much. More about this in the next chapter....