

Choosing a Safe and Successful Weight-loss Program

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

NIDDK | NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
DIABETES AND DIGESTIVE
AND KIDNEY DISEASES

WIN Weight-control Information Network

Choosing a weight-loss program may be difficult. You may not know what to look for in a weight-loss program or what questions to ask. This fact sheet can help you talk to your health care professional about weight loss and get the best information before choosing a program.

Talk With Your Health Care Professional

You may want to talk with your doctor or other health care professional about controlling your weight before you decide on a weight-loss program. Doctors do not always address issues such as healthy eating, physical activity, and weight management during general office visits. It is important for you to start the discussion in order to get the information you need. Even if you feel uncomfortable talking about your weight with your doctor, remember that he or she is there to help you improve your health. Here are some tips:

- Tell your health care professional that you would like to talk about your weight. Share your concerns about any medical conditions you have or medicines you are taking.
- Write down your questions in advance.
- Bring pen and paper to take notes.
- Bring a friend or family member along for support if this will make you feel more comfortable.
- Make sure you understand what your health care provider is saying. Do not be afraid to ask questions if there is something you do not understand.
- Ask for other sources of information like brochures or websites.

If your health care provider tells you that you should lose weight and you want to find a weight-loss program to help you, look for one that is based on regular physical activity and an eating plan that is balanced, healthy, and easy to follow.

- If you want more support, ask for a referral to a registered dietitian, a support group, or a commercial weight-loss program.
- Call your health care professional after your visit if you have more questions or need help.

Ask Questions

Find out as much as you can about your health needs before joining a weight-loss program. Here are some questions you might want to ask your health care professional:

About Your Weight

- Do I need to lose weight? Or should I just avoid gaining more?
- Is my weight affecting my health?
- Could my extra weight be caused by a health problem such as hypothyroidism or by a medicine I am taking?
(Hypothyroidism is when your thyroid gland does not produce enough thyroid hormone, a condition that can slow your metabolism—how your body creates and uses energy.)

About Weight Loss

- What should my weight-loss goal be?
- How will losing weight help me?

About Nutrition and Physical Activity

- How should I change my eating habits?
- What kinds of physical activity can I do?
- How much physical activity do I need?

About Treatment

- Should I take weight-loss drugs?
- What about weight-loss surgery?

- What are the risks of weight-loss drugs or surgery?
- Could a weight-loss program help me?

A Responsible and Safe Weight-loss Program

If your health care provider tells you that you should lose weight and you want to find a weight-loss program to help you, look for one that is based on regular physical activity and an eating plan that is balanced, healthy, and easy to follow. Weight-loss programs should encourage healthy behaviors that help you lose weight and that you can stick with every day. Safe and effective weight-loss programs should include:

- Healthy eating plans that reduce calories but do not forbid specific foods or food groups.
- Tips to increase moderate-intensity physical activity.
- Tips on healthy habits that also keep your cultural needs in mind, such as lower-fat versions of your favorite foods.
- Slow and steady weight loss. Depending on your starting weight, experts recommend losing weight at a rate of 1/2 to 2 pounds per week. Weight loss may be faster at the start of a program.
- Medical care if you are planning to lose weight by following a special formula diet, such as a very low-calorie diet (a program that requires careful monitoring from a doctor).
- A plan to keep the weight off after you have lost it.

Get Familiar With the Program

Gather as much information as you can before deciding to join a program. Professionals working for weight-loss programs should be able to answer the questions listed below.

What does the weight-loss program consist of?

- Does the program offer one-on-one counseling or group classes?
- Do you have to follow a specific meal plan or keep food records?
- Do you have to purchase special food, drugs, or supplements?
- If the program requires special foods, can you make changes based on your likes and dislikes and food allergies?
- Does the program help you be more physically active, follow a specific physical activity plan, or provide exercise instruction?
- Does the program teach you to make positive and healthy behavior changes?
- Is the program sensitive to your lifestyle and cultural needs?
- Does the program provide ways to keep the weight off? Will the program provide ways to deal with such issues as what to eat at social or holiday gatherings, changes to work schedules, lack of motivation, and injury or illness?

What are the staff qualifications?

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

Does the product or program carry any risks?

- Could the program hurt you?
- Could the recommended drugs or supplements harm your health?
- Do participants talk with a doctor?
- Does a doctor run the program?
- Will the program's doctors work with your personal doctor if you have a medical condition such as high blood pressure or are taking prescribed drugs?
- Is there ongoing input and follow-up from a health care professional to ensure your safety while you participate in the program?

How much does the program cost?

- What is the total cost of the program?
- Are there other costs, such as weekly attendance fees, food and supplement purchases, etc.?
- Are there fees for a follow-up program after you lose weight?
- Are there other fees for medical tests?

What results do participants typically have?

- How much weight does an average participant lose and how long does he or she keep the weight off?
- Does the program offer publications or materials that describe what results participants typically have?

If you are interested in finding a weight-loss program near you, ask your health care provider for a referral or contact your local hospital. For additional, general information, visit the Weight-control Information Network (WIN) online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov>.

Additional Reading

From the Weight-control Information Network

Active at Any Size, a brochure that helps very large people become more physically active. National Institutes of Health (NIH) Publication No. 04-4352.

Better Health and You: Tips for Adults, a brochure on healthy eating, is part of the series *Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Across Your Lifespan*. NIH Publication No. 07-4992.

Tips to Help You Get Active, a brochure with tips and solutions to common barriers to becoming more physically active. NIH Publication No. 06-5578.

Very Low-calorie Diets is a fact sheet for health professionals. NIH Publication No. 03-3894.

Weight Loss for Life is a brochure offering sensible weight-control advice. NIH Publication No. 04-3700.

From Other Organizations

MyPyramid Food Guidance System. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. <http://www.mypyramid.gov>

Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005. USDA and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). DHHS Publication No. HHS-ODPHP-2005-01-DGA-A. <http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines>

Additional Resources

Federal Trade Commission

Consumer Response Center
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20580
Phone: (202) FTC-HELP (382-4357)
Toll-free number: 1-877-382-4357
Internet: <http://www.ftc.gov/index.html>

International Food Information Council Foundation

1100 Connecticut Avenue, Suite 430
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 296-6540
Internet: <http://www.ific.org>

Weight-control Information Network

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Publications produced by WIN are reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This fact sheet was also reviewed by Susan Z. Yanovski, M.D., Director, Obesity and Eating Disorders Program and Co-Director, Office of Obesity Research, NIDDK.

This fact sheet is also available at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov>.

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