

The University of North Texas
Dining Services
White Paper: Wanting to Gain Weight

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Wanting to Gain Weight

To many people, it may seem strange that some would want to gain weight. In Western society, where the overly thin are regarded as desirable, it is tough to imagine that being so thin might be unhealthy. Although health is related to weight, you cannot just look at a person and determine if they are unhealthy or healthy solely by how large or small they are. We've all heard about the "obesity epidemic" here in the United States, but for some people the opposite is true, they may be too thin.

What is Underweight?

Generally, a BMI of <20 is considered underweight (1). BMI is your weight in relation to your height. Some people in this BMI range may be healthy, so it's important to visit your doctor to help determine what weight is healthy for you.

Complications of Being Underweight

Many complications can arise if you are underweight. You may have an increased risk of anemia, heart problems, poor bone density leading to osteoporosis, malnutrition, and more (1).

Possible Causes of Underweight

There may be many reasons for being underweight or losing weight unintentionally. Some people who have had a serious illness (such as cancer) or have been hospitalized for a long length of time may lose weight (2). Other reasons include dieting, increase in exercise, depression, loss of appetite, eating disorders, alcohol or drug abuse, or even simply not eating enough (3). Keep in mind also that some people are just small and thin. Genetics does play a role in how we are built (2).

How to Gain Weight in a Healthy Way

If you have lost weight unintentionally or are underweight, there are ways to gain weight. Keep in mind you want to be healthy in how you gain weight; you don't want to eat anything and everything in sight. Why not? Yes, you can get more calories that way, but if you are eating a diet full of sugars and fats, where is your body going to get the rest of its nutrition? All that "junk food" is called junk for a reason; because it has little, if any, nutrient value whatsoever. Plus, all that sugar can lead to dental caries, and all that fat can lead to cardiovascular problems including high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Just because you aren't "overweight" doesn't mean you can't get cardiovascular disease.

So how do I get healthy calories? It can be quite complicated for some to gain weight, without going overboard on the unhealthy foods. The dietitian at the Health Center can help you come up with a specific plan just for you. Also, having your doctor check things like your blood pressure can help assure you that you're on the right track.

Stay away from those "junk foods" mentioned earlier. Don't add sodas, chips, candy, donuts, and cookies to your diet just to gain weight. You can eat these things, just in moderation. Think of those foods as "sometimes" foods, not every day foods. Try to stick with foods that are nutrient dense, meaning you get the most nutrition bang for your buck. Some tips from the American Dietetic Association include:

- Topping your usual foods with some concentrated calories, like grated cheese on a cup of chili. Spread peanut butter on a whole-grain muffin.
- Prepare hot oatmeal or other cereal with milk, not water. Add margarine, honey, dried fruits and/or nuts after cooking the hot cereal.
- Garnish salads with healthy oils such as olive oil, whole olives, avocados, nuts and sunflower seeds (2).

A registered and licensed dietitian at the Mayo clinic recommends:

- Eat more frequently. Eat five to six small meals throughout the day rather than two or three large meals. (If you eat at the cafeterias, those meals can be larger, but remember to eat smaller meals, AKA snacks, in between.)
- Eat nutrient-rich foods. As part of an overall healthy diet, choose whole-grain breads, pastas and cereals; fruits and vegetables; low-fat dairy products; lean protein sources; and nuts and seeds.
- Watch what you drink. Don't fill up on diet soda, coffee, tea and other drinks with few calories and little nutritional value. Instead, drink smoothies or healthy shakes made with milk and fresh or frozen juice or fresh or frozen fruits. And drink fluids either 30 minutes before or after a meal, not with it, to avoid becoming full before you eat.
- Add in calorie-dense snacks. Choose calorie-dense foods, such as nuts, peanut butter, cheese, dried fruits and avocados. (Stay away from those chips and cookies.)
- Add cheese to casseroles, soups and scrambled eggs. (You can do this at the cafeterias; just get the cheese from the salad bar.)
- Have a sweet treat. But be sure to select sweets that also provide nutrients, such as bran muffins, yogurt, fruit pies and granola bars (4).

Exercise and Trying to Gain Weight

As you're changing your diet, there may not be a need to change your activity level. Yes, exercise burns calories, but exercise is also good for your health. Being sedentary may help you gain weight faster, but then you may have other health problems to correct later. In addition to staying healthy, exercise can help build muscle. Since muscle weighs more than fat does, building muscle will help you gain weight more so than just putting on fat pounds. Exercise can also help increase your appetite (4). Weight-bearing exercise such as weight lifting, walking, and running, will help increase your bone density which will not only lead to more healthy pounds, but prevent osteoporosis as well.

How to Gain Weight While Eating at UNT

At UNT Dining Services, we want healthy students and staff. One way we help is by identifying the foods with a nutrition card or label (you can find them near the food in the dining halls). The information included on the nutrition card is: the name of the item, the serving size, calories per serving, fat grams per serving, protein grams per serving, carbohydrate grams per serving, and allergen symbols. You can find more information on the dining services website under the “nutrition” tab. The nutrition booklets on the website will include more nutrition information about the food items than is given on the nutrition cards. Through the labels and the website, we can help you identify which foods have the calories and nutrients you need to help you gain weight.

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