

NIH News in Health

National Institutes of Health · Department of Health and Human Services · newsinhealth.nih.gov

Inside News: 3 Medications: Use as Directed... 4 Blocked Eye Veins... Palliative Care... Talking to Your Doctor

Shape Your Surroundings Make It Easier to Control Your Weight

On the face of it, controlling your weight is simple: eat less and exercise more. But it's much harder than it sounds. Researchers have recently found several factors influencing your weight that you might not be aware of. Here's how to recognize and take control of the things that may be tripping up your efforts at weight control.

You probably have a pretty good idea what a healthy diet is. Unfortunately, studies show that Americans are not eating enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains. And we're eating too much fat and salt. So where are we going wrong?

Part of the problem, according to Dr. Andrew Rundle of Columbia University, is that so many things around us influence the seemingly simple balance between how many **calories** we eat and how many we burn. "I've often thought that the obesity epidemic is an epidemic of a thousand paper cuts," he says. "So many things prod us throughout the day to raise our calorie intake and lower our energy expenditure."

Definitions

Calories

The amount of energy stored in food. When you eat more calories than your body can use, it stores that extra energy as fat.



Once you recognize what these things are, you can take control of your surroundings to make healthy habits easier.

First off, learn how to read nutrition labels and ignore the rest of the packaging. Phrases like "low-fat" don't necessarily mean anything if you're concerned about calories. Some low-fat and non-fat foods actually have more calories than the normal versions.

"It's not enough just to have the perception that something's healthy," says Dr. Susan Yanovski, co-director of the Office of Obesity Research at

NIH's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. "You actually have to look at what's in it."

Make sure to look at the number of portions, too, she says. That muffin might seem like it has 150 calories, but if the serving size is 1/3 of a muffin, it really has 450 calories.

Did you know that the size and shape of what's holding your food can affect how much you eat?

"People basically eat what's put in front of them," Yanovski says. It's the amount of food you eat that counts, not what it looks like. So try serving food on smaller plates and bowls if you'd like to eat less.

One of the reasons eating out has become such a challenge is that restaurant food portions have gotten larger. Super-sized dishes may seem like a good value, but not if they get you to eat more than your body needs. Order smaller dishes and plan to share larger ones. Or set aside a portion to take home with you before you even put a bite in your mouth.

continued on page 2

Subscribe @

newsinhealth.nih.gov

continued from page 1

It's easy to fool yourself about how much you're eating—and, it turns out, about how healthy the food is.



Wise Choices Weight Control Tips

- **Use nutrition labels.** Don't guess how many calories you're eating.
- **Watch your portions.** Value-size servings aren't a bargain if you're eating too much.
- **Cut the sugar.** Don't let sugary soda or other sweets crowd out healthy foods and drinks.
- **Don't eat out of habit.** Mindless eating at work or in front of the TV can pack on the pounds.
- **Think about the whole meal,** not just the main course.
- **Use smaller dishes and containers.** Larger ones encourage you to eat more.
- **Keep reminders of how much you're eating.** Wrappers, empty containers and bones nearby remind you of how much you've eaten.
- **Get enough sleep.** Less sleep is linked to higher rates of obesity.
- **Get active.** Look for opportunities to add physical activity to your daily routine.
- **Do it together.** Family, friends and coworkers can all help each other make healthy changes to their lives.

Marketing researchers have found that when restaurants claim to be healthy, people are more likely to underestimate the calories in their main dish and order higher calorie side dishes. One study found that when there's healthy food available, people actually make more indulgent choices. Remember, it's what you eat that counts, not what you think about eating.

Some areas have enacted laws requiring restaurants to list calories on the menu. "When people actually have calorie values staring them in the face, they may make better choices," Yanovski says.

Unfortunately, in most places, you have to do some work to check calories when you eat out. Some restaurants may have nutrition information available if you request it, or might have it posted on their web site.

You may not think about sleep when you're concerned with weight, but studies show that people who get less sleep have a higher risk of obesity (along with other health problems). Lack of sleep can disrupt the normal chemical signals in your body and lead you to eat more. So try to get enough sleep. And make sure not to snack mindlessly when you're sleepy, like late at night.

Your neighborhood and community can affect your weight as well. A research team led by Rundle found that access to produce markets, supermarkets and health food stores is associated with lower rates of obesity in New York City.

"It's also an issue in rural areas because the very small towns don't



Web Links

For links to further information about weight control, see this story online:

<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2009/October/feature1.htm>

have supermarkets," says Dr. Madeline Dalton of Dartmouth Medical School. "Sometimes you need to drive 15 to 20 miles to get to a store that has fruits and vegetables. Clearly, that's a problem."

Wherever you live, Dalton says, you need to plan to eat well. "It's really a matter of getting to know your environment and figuring out how to get healthy food on a regular basis."

Your surroundings can also affect how active you are. Studies show that people in neighborhoods without sidewalks, or who live far from a recreational facility or a walking or biking trail, are more likely to be obese. People who perceive their community as unpleasant or unsafe are also more likely to be obese. Recognize your particular challenges and figure out how to add exercise and physical activity to your daily routine.

Once you identify the things that affect your weight, you can start changing them. Set modest goals and gradually improve your habits. "Pick 1 or 2 things in your life that you think you can change," Dalton says. "Just walk a quarter of a mile a day to get started. Cut out 1 soda every day." You may have to try a few times, but when you meet each goal you can move on to the next one.

NIH-funded research has found that people who are close influence each other's weight. You may be more likely to lose weight if you work with friends, relatives and co-workers to develop healthier lifestyles. Get the family together to make nutritious meals. Form walking groups with co-workers. Take a dance class with friends.

"What you really want to do is make the healthy choice the easy choice, the default choice," Yanovski says. ■

NIH News in Health (ISSN 1556-3898)

National Institutes of Health

Office of Communications
& Public Liaison
Building 31, Room 5B64
Bethesda, MD 20892-2094
nihnewsinhealth@od.nih.gov
Tel: 301-435-7489 Fax: 301-496-0019

Editor Harrison Wein, Ph.D.

Assistant Editor Vicki Contie

Contributors Vicki Contie, Bryan Ewsichek (design), Margaret Georgiann (illustrations) and Harrison Wein

newsinhealth.nih.gov

Attention Editors Reprint our articles and illustrations in your own publication. Our material is not copyrighted. Please acknowledge *NIH News in Health* as the source and send us a copy.

For more health information from NIH, visit



<http://health.nih.gov>

Medications: Use as Directed

The Risks of Prescription Drug Abuse

Prescription drugs help millions of people live longer and healthier lives. But if you don't take your medicines as directed, or if you take someone else's medications, the results can be deadly. Unfortunately, prescription drug abuse is all too common in the United States.

Misuse of prescription medications affects people of all ages and races. The deaths of Michael Jackson and Heath Ledger have been blamed on dangerous combinations of prescribed drugs. But medication abuse can affect ordinary people—maybe even someone you know—as well as celebrities. A federal survey in 2008 found that about 1 in 5 people ages 12 and up said they'd taken a prescription drug for nonmedical purposes at least once in their lifetimes.

People abuse prescription drugs for many reasons, including to get high, lose weight or build muscle. But this abuse carries a serious risk

of addiction. And it can lead to other health problems, including irregular heartbeats, seizures, breathing problems and personality changes. Car accidents and physical injury are other concerns.

"There's a myth that prescription drugs are safe because they come from a drugstore. But when people take them outside of a doctor's supervision, we don't necessarily know how dangerous they can be," says Dr. Wilson Compton of NIH's National Institute on Drug Abuse. "A dose that's perfectly safe for one person who's taken the drug for a long time may be potentially lethal for another. And when you combine drugs with other substances, like alcohol, you're taking a great risk."

The 3 categories of drugs most commonly abused are stimulants, depressants and painkillers. Stimulants—including Adderall, Dexedrine and Ritalin—are often prescribed to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Depressants—such as Ativan, Valium and Xanax—are used to treat anxiety, panic attacks and sleep disorders.

When taken exactly as prescribed, prescription painkillers like opioids can effectively manage pain and rarely cause addiction. But because of abuse, opioids and other prescription painkillers, sometimes taken in combination with other drugs, cause nearly half of overdose deaths. Opioids include morphine, codeine, hydrocodone (Vicodin) and oxycodone (such as OxyContin, Percodan or Percocet).

Opioid use among high school students is a major concern. "About 1 in 10 twelfth graders report non-medical use of Vicodin during the past year, and about 1 in 20 abused OxyContin," says Compton.



NIH has several studies under way to learn more about prescription drug abuse and who's at risk for addiction. "We're also working to develop better treatments for pain that might be less addictive or less likely to be abused," says Compton.

If you have prescription medications, take them exactly as directed. And if you have prescriptions for commonly abused drugs, maintain control of them so they don't tempt visitors. "It appears that most people who are abusing prescription drugs are not getting them directly from physicians. In many cases, the drugs are obtained from family or friends who have prescriptions," says Compton.

Make sure to use prescription medications the right way, just as the doctor ordered. ■



Wise Choices Take Your Medications Properly

- Always follow prescribed directions. Read all the information provided by the pharmacist.
- Never stop taking or change your medication doses without first discussing it with your doctor.
- Be aware of potential interactions with other drugs. Tell your healthcare professional about all the medications and dietary and herbal supplements you're taking.
- Never use someone else's prescription.
- Safeguard medications by keeping track of how much you have and safely disposing of drugs you don't need.



Web Links

For more information about prescription drug abuse, see this story online:

<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2009/October/feature2.htm>



Health Capsules

For links to more information about these topics, visit this page online:
<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2009/October/capsules.htm>

Improving Vision in Patients with Blocked Eye Veins

Injecting the eye with medications can improve vision in patients who have blockage in an eye vein, a new study shows. But laser treatment may be a better option for patients who have blockages in small branches of the vein.

Millions of Americans lose some of their vision each year. Vision loss can occur if a blood clot blocks blood flow to the eye's **retina**. This leads to a condition called retinal vein occlusion. In some cases, the blockage leads to **macular edema**, a common cause of blindness.

Eye doctors often use laser therapy to improve vision in patients with blockages in small branches of the vein. But there's been no proven treatment for patients with blockages in the main vein. Some doctors have found that injecting the eye with medications called corticosteroids

can improve vision in patients with either kind of blockage.

To find out which treatments might be best for different patients, NIH-funded scientists studied nearly 700 people. All had vision loss and blockages in either the large or the small veins of the retina.

After 1 year, corticosteroid injections significantly improved vision in about 26% patients who had blockages in the main retina vein. Only 7% of patients who generally received no

treatment had similar improvements. The finding provides the first solid evidence that eye injections are an effective long-term treatment for this type of vision loss.

For patients with small-vein blockage, eye injections significantly improved vision in about 1 out of 4 patients. Laser therapy was just as effective. But patients receiving injections were more likely to develop other eye problems. Because laser therapy led to fewer complications, it may be the best option for patients with blockages in smaller veins. ■



Definitions

Retina

Light-sensitive tissue that lines the back of the eye.

Macular Edema

Fluid buildup in the center of the retina.

What Is Palliative Care? New Brochure Explains

Palliative care aims to ease distressing symptoms, such as pain, breathing difficulties, sleep problems and nausea, when you have a serious illness. You can receive palliative care at the same time you're receiving treatments for your primary illness. Palliative care may significantly improve quality of life for patients with chronic as well as terminal conditions.

A new easy-to-read brochure, called *Palliative Care: The Relief You Need When You're Experiencing the*

Symptoms of Serious Illness, can help you learn more about palliative care. The 14-page brochure tells you how palliative care is different from hospice care, how and when to request palliative care and where to get additional information.

The brochure is available online at www.ninr.nih.gov/PalliativeCareBrochure. To receive a free copy by mail, or to order additional brochures, send an e-mail to info@ninr.nih.gov, or call NIH's National Institute of Nursing Research at 301-496-0207. ■



Featured Web Site Talking to Your Doctor

www.nih.gov/dearcommunication/talktoyourdoctor.htm

Communication is key to good health care. When you visit your doctor, ask questions and talk openly about your symptoms and concerns. This web page links you to NIH resources that help you make the most of your conversations with your doctor.

The screenshot shows the NIH website interface. At the top, it says "U.S. Department of Health & Human Services" and "National Institutes of Health". Below that, there's a navigation menu with "Home", "Health", "Research", "News", "Education", "Publications", "About NIH". The main heading is "Talking to Your Doctor". Underneath, there are "Quick Links" for "Dear Communication", "Health Library", "Plain Language", "Clear & Simple", "Cultural Competency", and "Patient Research". To the right, there's a section titled "Resources from NIH" with a list of bullet points: "Make and most. Today's patients are playing an active role in their health care. Patients and doctors work closely together to achieve the best possible level of health care. An important part of this partnership is clear communication. Asking the right questions—and obtaining quality information about prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and recovery—help ensure safety, prevent errors, and improve health. For example: • Sharing questions about prescriptions with can prevent taking too much or too little medicine. • Being honest about symptoms can help doctors order the right tests and make the right diagnosis. • Clear instructions after an operation or hospital stay may be the difference between complete recovery or re-injury and relapse." Below this is a small photo of a doctor and a patient talking, and a section titled "How to Talk to your Doctor" with a bullet point: "Preparing for Your Doctor Visit, NIH News in Health".

How to get NIH News in Health

Read it online.

Visit newsinhealth.nih.gov

Subscribe

Get it by email.

Click the "Subscribe" button on our home page to sign up for email updates when new issues are posted online.

Get it in print.

Download PDF files at our web site for printing, or contact us to get print copies free of charge by mail for display in offices, libraries or clinics within the U.S. See page 2 for our contact information.