A weighty issue: understanding the impact of excess weight on your health

In our appearance-obsessed society, we're always on a quest to shed pounds and be our best. Losing weight isn't simply about looking better or fitting into your "skinny" jeans.



Carrying excess weight is linked to a whole range of dangerous health problems. It also makes your body work harder to do simple, everyday things like breathe, pump blood and move around. If you're struggling with your weight, you're not alone.

According to a Statistics Canada study about a quarter of Canadian adults is clinically obese, while in the United States, roughly a third of the population is.

Regardless of your current weight you need to understand how excess fat affects your body and what you can to do to prevent or reverse the damage.

If you're overweight or obese you're at an increased risk for **type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure** and **stroke**. Obesity has also been linked to high rates of uterine, ovarian, breast, colon, rectum and prostate **cancer**. Other serious diseases and health problems associated with obesity include:

- Osteoarthritis
- Depression and other mental health concerns
- Skin problems like intertrigo
- Asthma
- Gynecological problems including infertility
- Sleep apnea and other breathing problems
- Gallbladder disease
- Fatty liver disease
- Metabolic syndrome
- Blood lipid abnormalities

Where you carry your body fat is as important as *how many extra pounds* you have. If it's concentrated around the midsection rather than the hips, you're more likely to experience related health issues. Also, if you have a family history of chronic disease or are a drinker or smoker, you increase your risks significantly by being overweight.

What can you do?

Whether you're at a healthy weight, overweight or approaching obesity, you can take action to prevent dangerous weight gain and all the health problems that come with it. The steps to preventing obesity are pretty much identical to those for losing weight. To be successful you need to *first* make a commitment to your new, healthy lifestyle. To help you either reach or maintain your ideal weight make sure you:

Get active. One of the single most effective ways to prevent weight gain is to commit to an exercise plan. Regular physical activity will burn calories and build muscle, which will help you look and feel good and keep the weight off. Start slowly but work yourself up to at least 30 minutes of physical activity everyday. To get the best results make sure you alternate between endurance, flexibility and strength exercises. Find ways to include physical activity in your daily life like choosing the stairs instead of the elevator, parking farther away from the mall entrance or walking your kids to school. Just make sure you always check with a health professional before starting a new fitness program.

Fix your diet. In the case of finding your healthy weight, you truly are what you eat. Stay away from fad diets and instead commit to healthy eating. Although some diets may help you lose weight quickly, they usually involve avoiding certain foods and the weight will just pack back on once you return to your normal eating habits. Focus on low-calorie, nutrient-rich foods like fruits, vegetables, fish, nuts and whole grains.

Eat consistent meals throughout the day but look out for potions sizes—we typically eat way more than we actually need. Avoid processed foods that are high in saturated and trans fats, salt and sugar, which are a major cause of weight gain.

Keep tabs. You should regularly monitor your progress by weighing yourself. Don't get obsessed with numbers but this will help you know where you came from and where you want to be. Paying attention to your weight will also help you know whether your efforts are working, allow you to feel good about your progress and can point out small gains before they become big problems.

Set and reach goals. Make specific and realistic goals to keep you motivated along the way. Instead of vowing to exercise more, say, "I will walk for 20 minutes, three days a week for a week." Celebrate your successes with non-food rewards like buying yourself a fresh bouquet of flowers or enjoying a day at the beach—then set more goals! Just realize that there will be times where you fall off track and fall short. You may find it helpful to enlist a friend or family member—who is also trying to lose weight or maintaining weight loss—to help you stay focused and healthy.

Luckily, many of the health problems caused by extra weight can be reversed or substantially decreased by getting to an ideal weight. This will not only leave you looking and feeling great, but will be the best thing you can do for your overall health, wellbeing and happiness. Just take it slow, commit wholeheartedly and enjoy all the positive benefits it will bring.