

I'm worried
about my weight



I don't
like the
way I look

I don't have
enough energy

I struggle to
find time for
exercise

Most of us know we need to aim for a healthy, balanced diet and regular exercise to maintain our physical health.

These same goals are also important when maintaining our mental health and well-being.

Many of us struggle with balanced eating, being active and feeling good about our bodies...

Do diets work?

Diets, especially drastic diets, are usually not an effective strategy for people wanting to change their body shape. Many of us are not very successful at staying on a diet. Most people who lose weight from dieting only lose modest amounts of weight and eventually gain it back. Dieting can also have surprising long-term effects. Some studies have found that dieting can actually make it **more** likely that we will become heavier over time.

Everyone seems to be on a diet

Dieting to lose weight is very common.

- approximately one in four women and one in ten men are currently on some kind of diet; youth are also vulnerable at similar rates
- most people currently dieting have tried at least four other diets in the past
- more than half of Canadians regularly watch their weight
- many more people will diet at some time in their lives
- studies confirm that the interest in weight loss is as strong as ever while interest in nutrition is lower than ever

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Read on for information
and practical tips that can
help you make good choices
for you and your family.

Feeling bad about our bodies can lead to disordered eating

Dieting can have a powerful effect on our health

When we diet, a number of changes occur in the body that influence our physical and mental health. Drastic diets can be hard on the body and increase the risks of medical complications. You might notice dieting also starts to affect your emotions. You might feel sad or irritable or experience mood swings. You might notice that it's harder to concentrate and your thinking can become distorted (e.g., eating one cookie leads you to believe you are a complete failure). Because your body is detecting a food shortage, you might feel deprived, preoccupied with food, and more sensitive to food cues around you. Your energy levels might decrease and you may begin to feel tired more often. These changes make it easy to understand why people find diets uncomfortable and hard to maintain.

Why do so many of us diet?
Many people feel unhappy with the way they look and want to be thinner—even if they are of normal weight. We are constantly being shown thin body images on television, movies and in magazines. These images are unrealistic for most people to obtain. For one reason, our genetic background predisposes us to different shapes and sizes. In addition, photographs are often touched up and the people in them often have access to extensive body-shaping exercise regimens or plastic surgeries.

Why do media images make us feel bad?
It's natural to feel unhappy with our bodies when comparing ourselves to unrealistic images. We are more likely to feel this way if we already feel down or dissatisfied with how we look, or when we do not feel supported by the people in our lives. It can be tempting to believe that we would be happier if we lost weight. Media images often portray that being thin means we will be happy, successful and in control of our lives. Sadly, there also continues to be widespread discrimination and stigma directed towards those of us who are overweight or obese. In reality, both happy and unhappy people come in all shapes and sizes.

With all the emphasis on being thin, it's not surprising that some of us obsess about our weight and feel extremely upset about our body shape. An unhealthy preoccupation with losing weight can be fueled by giving compliments when someone loses weight or criticizing them when they gain weight. Kids and adults who feel this kind of pressure to be thin are at increased risk for turning to unhealthy coping strategies and developing an eating disorder.

Examples of unhealthy coping strategies that are considered disordered eating can include:

- Not eating enough to maintain a healthy body weight
- Deliberate vomiting
- Excessive exercise to burn off calories
- Taking laxatives
- Trouble controlling binge eating
- Smoking to reduce appetite and sense of hunger
- Using amphetamines (diet pills or illegal drugs) to reduce appetite and sense of hunger

Some of these options may seem like they help with weight loss or weight control. Unfortunately, none of these strategies work when it comes to maintaining balanced food intake or a healthy body weight. All of these strategies can also be extremely dangerous with high rates of medical complications. Many of these behaviours can be signs a person is struggling with an eating disorder that requires treatment. There is help available for people when their eating patterns or concern about weight and shape begins to compromise their health. If you or someone you care about is coping with these issues, call the Mental Health Information Line at 1-800-661-2121 (or 604-669-7600) or visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for more information about eating disorders and helpful resources.

exercise can improve our mental health!

Exercise can help our physical health by increasing cardiovascular fitness, increasing energy, and building strength. Exercise, unlike dieting, can also have a positive impact on our mental health. People who exercise often report less anxiety. Exercise has been found to help improve feelings of mild depression. Exercise can also help us be less affected by the stress in our lives. To get this positive impact on our mood, we don't have to do heavy exercise. It is actually more effective to stay within our comfort zone and slowly increase our activity levels. Be creative about ways to increase the daily activity in your life. Everything from taking the stairs instead of the elevator to gardening to working out at the gym counts. Try doing some mild exercises while watching TV, use your lunch break to take a 15-minute walk, plan a family outing around something active that you can all enjoy or come up with other fun options that fit into your schedule.

Why is it so hard to start or stay on exercise programs?

You are not alone in finding this difficult. Approximately 50% of people who begin an exercise program stop within six months. Although exercise has many positive effects on our mental health, many of these changes are experienced after you finish exercising or in the long-term. Let's be honest—some of us do not find the actual exercising enjoyable so it makes it harder to do. Be sure to choose the kinds of exercise *you enjoy*—even if it's different from what everyone else seems to be doing. What counts is that you choose some kind of physical activity that is fun and works with your schedule.

You may have to remind yourself that if you keep at it, both your body and your mind will feel better. To set your-

self up for success, start with small, realistic goals and try to find an exercise buddy. People who exercise with a friend or spouse are much more likely to stick with it in the long-term.

Can you exercise too much?

Yes, you can. Sometimes people exercise when they are injured, physically ill, or have not eaten enough, when the healthier option would be to rest. This is more likely to be a problem for people who are very concerned about body shape or who are exercising as a way of getting rid of food that they have eaten. Other times, people want to see results fast and so take on too much too soon. Don't try to keep up with an exercise buddy who is more advanced. Be gentle with yourself, set realistic goals and make sure any increases in intensity are gradual over time.

Why is it so hard to make healthy choices?

We are most vulnerable to unhealthy eating and lack of exercise when we need it the most. The very things that exercise and good eating help in the long-term (our negative moods, low energy levels and lack of fitness) may also make it harder to commit to exercising and eating well. Some people find that they eat more in the face of stress and usually food with less nutritional value (especially junk or fast food). Other people find that they hardly eat at all. They may also feel too drained to exercise. Take it one day at a time—each day is a chance to start fresh. Try to remind yourself that healthy living choices are especially important during times of stress and will help you feel better. It is important to directly address the source of stress and explore other helpful coping options. See the full range of wellness modules at www.heretohelp.bc.ca for more information and practical tips.

Can healthy living be more difficult for some people?

Yes, some of us may find it especially difficult to maintain healthy living choices and a positive attitude about our bodies. Teenage girls and boys, athletes with weight restrictions (e.g., wrestlers, jockeys), dancers, models, actors and gay men are especially vulnerable to disordered eating given the high social pressures to be thin and fit. In addition, some people may have other things going on in their lives that make healthy eating and exercising more of a challenge. Our appetite and energy levels can be negatively influenced by chronic illnesses (e.g., diabetes, Crohn's disease), pain conditions, mental illness, medications (for physical or mental health problems) and other medical treatments (e.g., chemotherapy for cancer). Adults and seniors, both men and women, are also at risk for not eating or exercising enough. Young people, along with pressures to be thin, also face more inactive lifestyles and easier access to unhealthy food choices than past generations. Finding ways to improve eating and exercise habits is a critical part of self-care for all of us. Talk to your physician or a trained health professional about creative and manageable ways to make healthy choices. Start slow, reward yourself for goals achieved and involve your friends and family in your plan.

Quick Tips for Healthy Living

Healthy living is all about moderation, balance, and flexibility. There will be some days when we don't eat healthy foods and some days when we don't do enough exercise. This is totally normal in our busy, sometimes stressful, lives. We get a more accurate picture of how we have been doing if we look back over the past month or so. For the month ahead, aim to make small changes that will improve your health, both mental and physical.

- Nourish your body throughout the day and don't skip meals.
 - Eat a variety of foods and aim for a balance over the month.
 - Rather than worry about 'good' versus 'bad' foods, moderation is the key
 - Most of us can increase how many fruit and vegetables we eat.
- Drink lots of water, which helps reduce fatigue and replenishes cells in the body
 - Use caffeine in moderation, particularly if you are prone to anxiety or sleep problems
 - Listen to your body's signals; it will let you know when you are full or hungry
- Become more conscious of why you eat when you are not really hungry: try other ways of coping with feelings of boredom, unhappiness, loneliness or social pressure
 - Use exercise as a way to deal with stress
 - Slowly increase your physical activity level
 - Consider joining a gym or other formal exercise program
 - Check out your local community centre for a range of fun options and programs for kids and adults of all ages
 - Try adding in extra activity throughout your normal day, such as parking a block from work and walking the rest of the way or using the stairs instead of the elevator. Even getting up to change TV channels can make a difference!
 - Remind yourself that weight and shape are not the only way of evaluating your self-worth—think of at least one other way you are a worthwhile, loveable, talented person who has something to offer the world

We don't have to make big changes to improve our wellness and maintain good mental health. The good news is that when it comes to healthy eating and exercise, every little bit counts!

Additional Resources

- American Dietetic Association. Visit www.eatright.org for healthy eating tips.
- Dieticians of Canada. Visit www.dieticians.ca for healthy eating tips.
- Hayes, K.F. (2002). *Move your Body, Tone Your Mood: A Scientifically Proven Program to Help you Ease Anxiety, Lift Depression, Manage Stress and Enjoy your Body*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Health Canada: Healthy Living. Visit www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/lifestyles for helpful tips and resources around getting active, balanced eating and more.
- National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Visit www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/tips

Select Sources

- Fairburn, C. & Brownell, K. (Eds.). (2002). *Eating Disorders and Obesity: A Comprehensive Handbook*. (Second edition). New York : Guilford Press.
- Salmon, P. (2001). Effects of physical exercise on anxiety, depression, and sensitivity to stress: A unifying theory. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 21, 33-61.